



Women through the Eyes of Men: Evolution of the Portrayal of Female Figures by Their Male Creators

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Abstract

The portrayal of female characters by male authors has long been a contentious area in gender studies. Patriarchal conventions have perpetuated an asymmetric power relationship between men and women in society, leading to an imbalance in the ratio of male to female authors in literature. Consequently, female representation has been somewhat limited and unsatisfactory throughout history. As a counter to this, a course of feminist criticism emerged, in which critics like Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett argued that the perspective of male authors towards their female creations has been outrightly problematic. This paper, therefore, seeks to follow the approach of these feminists and analyse various female portrayals in the hands of writers who happen to be men, beginning with the ancients and extending to the moderns. The aim is to trace whether there has been any evolution in the depiction of female characters in male-authored texts and, if so, how significant these transformations are.



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Since antiquity, women have been scrutinised and disregarded under the purview of the societal conventions dominated by patriarchy. Until the 19th century, women were not allowed to write publicly. In fact, they were disallowed from going to school. Owing to this fact, a majority of writers in the literary canon have been observed to be males. As philosophers and critics across the centuries have already noted that literature reflects society, the female figures in literature, too, have been, with few significant exceptions, mostly and unabashedly relegated to an inferior status. It was only in the 1970s that, during the second wave of feminism, female critics like Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett scrutinised these texts through an approach which came to be known as ‘phallogocentric criticism’, that according to Fiona Talon (2006) “sought to expose the masculine bias of the works”(p. 599). This paper, therefore, will follow the path that Kate Millett (1970) takes in her seminal work, *Sexual Politics*, to analyse the structures in male-authored literature that “re-created sexual inequalities and cemented the patriarchal values of the society” (Talon, 2006, p. 599). At the same time, it will also explore those texts by male writers in which women have been depicted with utmost empathy and care and not diminished as a “second sex”(Beauvoir, 1949/2010, p.2). This way, the paper aims to give a comprehensive picture of how women have been perceived through the eyes of their male creators, in the face of patriarchal constructs, over the years. To delineate the journey of female portrayal, it is pertinent that the analysis begins with texts, as early as Homer’s *The Iliad* (n.d) and Vyasa’s *The Mahabharata* (n.d.). Being epics, these texts have no lack of grandiose. They celebrate valour, courage, and strength. However, the portrayal of women in these is quite problematic. Although characters like Helen and Draupadi exercise a fair share of authority, it is undeniable that they are still objects of lust and pleasure for men. In *The Iliad* (2003), the tradition of women being the ‘prizes of the war’ has been depicted in a significantly nonchalant manner. In Book 3, when the Trojans and Greeks advance to battle, Paris proposes to have single combat with Menelaus and says, “the one who wins and proves himself the better man can take all property and woman home” (lines 71-73). In Book 1, even a fight ensues between Achilles and Agamemnon over Briseis, a Trojan girl who had been presented as a ‘prize’ to Achilles. The root of the conflict is that Agamemnon, after being threatened by Apollo, had to return his own war prize, Chryseis, and as compensation for his loss, he seizes Achilles’ prize. Claude Levi-Strauss in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969) suggested that, as women possess the ability to bear children, they were considered “supreme gifts” (p. 54) in “primitive societies” (p. 54). Elevating them to the position of unparalleled importance, such customs instantly pulled them down by commodifying them as agents of reproduction that cannot be merely given away but have to be ‘compensated’ (p.54) with another.

Another very chauvinistic notion stems from epics like these that hold that ‘the reason behind every war is always a woman’. In *The Iliad*, again, the ten-year-long Trojan War breaks out between the Greeks and the Trojans, when Queen Helen, the wife of the Greek king, Menelaus, is apparently abducted by the Trojan prince, Paris. However, it becomes very clear from the onset that the jilted Menelaus, along with his brother, Agamemnon, the King of Mycenae, does not declare war against the Trojans because of his immense love for his wife; rather it was to avenge his wounded pride due to the fact that a man’s honour has always been intrinsically linked to the women he is related to. On the other hand, *The Mahabharata* depicts the war of Kurukshetra fought between the Pandavas and Kauravas. When the Pandavas lose a game of dice, ‘chausar’ against the Kauravas, according to the mentioned rules, they lose all their royal

titles, possessions, and become slaves to the latter. Consequently, Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas, became their slave by default. Hence, the Kauravas, in order to humiliate the Pandavas further, vow to forcefully undress Draupadi in front of the whole court, because of the same reason that a man's honour lies in that of the women in his family, especially his wife. What is noteworthy here is how Draupadi is never given the autonomy to choose whether to gamble herself into the game. She is dragged by hair into the court while she screams and begs to be spared as she is menstruating at that point, but her cries are given a deaf ear by her husbands, as they are apparently bound by the rule of righteousness and the other men who are drunk in their lust and vengeance. Although the Pandavas swear to avenge Draupadi's public disrespect by declaring the great war or the 'Dharmayuddh', yet it is quite obvious that more than her honour, they are more inclined to avenge the humiliation of themselves.

Later, in the didactic essays of Francis Bacon, we again find a similar misogynistic approach in the advice that he gives to his readers. He portrays women as objects of distraction in a man's life. And cautions boys against "quarrels" as "they are commonly for mistresses" (Bacon, 1597/1908, p.81). It is interesting how, while being taught, teachers to date suggest their pupils not to consider Bacon's essays in the contemporary context, as those were meant for aristocratic young boys of the seventeenth century only. More striking is the case of John Milton, who in his magnum opus, *Paradise Lost* (1674), leaves no stone unturned to ensure Eve's inferiority to Adam, even in their unfallen state. During his era, when intellect was considered to be superior to any other faculty, he relegated Eve to a status whereby she is merely a narcissistic object of beauty and has to submit to Adam, who, ostensibly, possesses "wisdom, which alone is truly fair" (line 491). He draws a clear distinction between them, writing:

Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed;

For contemplation he, and valour formed;

For softness she, and sweet attractive grace; (Milton, 1674, lines 296-298)

Some critics argue that these descriptions are not really Milton's, but they are through the eyes of Satan. So, here Satan is the one who is misogynistic and not Milton. However, this does not seem like a plausible defence.

The Restoration comedies like William Congreve's *The Way of the World* (n.d.) and George Etherege's *Man of Mode* (n.d.), for that matter, portray the position of women in the contemporary society, afflicted by promiscuity, adultery, cuckoldry, and the mercenary outlook of life. Women of the Restoration era were financially and socially dependent on men completely, so their only way of stability and a better way of life was through marriage with an affluent man. Thus, the question of love and chemistry became secondary, leading to flirtatious but well-to-do men like Mirabell and Dorimant to be popular among ladies and women like Arabella, Millamant, and Harriet having to comply with such men in order not to turn into a fortuneless spinster. This is what Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (2010) advocates against. She champions financial independence for women so that they are able to break away from the 'vassalage' (p. 29) of being a man's wife or mistress whose future prospects are tied to the man's financial support and so his whims.

Historically, women in literature written by men have mostly been restricted to the extremes of stereotypical portrayals of either the 'angel in the house' or the 'fallen woman'. During the nineteenth century, this kind of portrayal became even more prominent. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (2000) pick on this regressive aspect

in the Victorian novels which defined women bound within the domestic space as the 'angel in the house' (p. 17) and juxtaposed them with women who attempted to transgress the domestic threshold and depicted them as 'monsters' (p.17) or 'fallen'. We find this dichotomy in the female characterisation in Thomas Hardy's novels. Even though he explored the aspect of women's helplessness and predicament in the male-dominated society, yet the treatment of his female protagonists says a lot about the contemporary outlook on women. In his novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), the protagonist, Henchard, commits the grievous act of selling his wife in a drunken whim. Henchard's wife, Susan, has been depicted as a meek, unassuming woman who is overly concerned with propriety. She is the epitome of the 'angel in the house', whose dignity is violated, and so, Henchard has to face suffering by being abandoned by the world and dying alone. On the contrary, in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), tragedy in the life of the protagonist, Tess, initiates after she is raped by the dissolute Alec d'Urberville, resulting in her pregnancy out of wedlock, damaging her and her family's reputation irredeemably. It is remarkable how Tess, despite having no fault of her own, becomes a 'fallen woman'; thus, here she, unlike Susan, has to face dishonour and neglect of society. It is interesting to note the similarity in the ending that both Henchard and Tess receive at the hands of Hardy. Despite there being a striking difference in the reason behind their turn of fate, Henchard brings it upon himself, while Tess is subjected to it by a lecherous man, yet Hardy treats the end of these two characters, i.e., death, with a similar piteous temperament.

Despite the abundance of patriarchal sentiments in the male authors, the society was never devoid of such authors who were not only able to recognise women in their true potential but were also gutsy enough to call out the toxic norms of patriarchy. These writers went against the grain and depicted powerful female characters, advocating women's empowerment. A few of these authors even belonged to a time, much before the concept of feminism came into being; they may be referred to as 'proto-feminists' as they anticipated modern feminism. Such writers include Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, and others. Chaucer, in his *The Canterbury Tales* (n.d.), includes the character of the Wife of Bath, who has had five husbands and thus considers herself an expert on marriage. This piece provides an insight into the role of women in the Late Middle Ages and throws light on tabooed topics such as women's libido and polygamy. Although few of Shakespeare's plays, like *The Winter's Tale* (n.d) and *Othello* (n.d), have been treated with patriarchal temperament with the portrayal of characters like the jealous and distrustful Leontes and Othello, respectively, who either sends his wife to jail or kills her in rage, his other plays have some of most strongly portrayed women, like Lady Macbeth. Unlike the contemporary trend of portraying women as timid and submissive characters who detest violence, Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* (n.d) not only instigates her husband to kill King Duncan in order to become king himself, but also attempts to commit the crime herself. Even in poems like Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess' (1842), the horrors of an extreme patriarchal outlook, in which women are considered as possessions rather than fellow human beings, have been highlighted. Browning, in his poem, has pondered upon the practice of 'honour-killing', which was a prevalent tradition during his time and has become recurrent in South Asian countries in modern times. The Duke, apparently a dotting husband, unwittingly reveals his true nature as an extremely jealous and possessive one, while describing a portrait of his dead wife –

The depth and passion of its earnest glance,

But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I) (Browning, 1842, lines 8-10)

He further exposes his chauvinism by disapproving of her affable nature and finally admits to having killed her -

. . . Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. (Browning, 1842, lines 43-46)

Fast-forwarding to the twentieth century, authors such as Federico Garcia Lorca and Gabriel Garcia Marquez take forward the issue explored by Browning and portray the rigid patriarchal conventions in the societies of Spanish Andalusia and Latin America. In Lorca's *Blood Wedding* (1933) and Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981/1996), the theme of honour killing for the sake of upholding the family's prestige has been explored. The Bride in the former piece and Angela Vicario in the latter both are denied their right to have sexual emancipation and are forced to conform to the societal expectation of marriage, motivated by financial prosperity and the prospect of carrying the bloodline forward. Due to the pragmatic and materialist outlook towards human relationships, Leonardo and the Bridegroom in *Blood Wedding* and Santiago Nasar in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* become the victims of these illogical conventions and eventually lose their lives. As enumerated, it is evident that since time immemorial till the present day, patriarchal conventions and attitudes continue to command the society and thus the realm of literature, despite the advancements in thought that mankind has observed throughout centuries.

Time and again, progressive men have proved their spirit of solidarity towards women against the irrational conventions of patriarchy. In an era of the Renaissance in Bengal, when the concept of Feminism or women's emancipation and empowerment was non-existent, men like Ram Mohan Roy and Vidyasagar stood for the rights of women against social evils like 'sati', child marriage, and widowhood. Authors and artists such as Rabindranath Tagore, Henrik Ibsen, G.B. Shaw, Harold Pinter, Mahesh Dattani, Satyajit Ray, and others have over and over again presented us with strong female characters or have portrayed them with utmost nuance, defying the patriarchal stereotypes. While women were mostly considered to be emotional beings, dependent on men, devoid of any rational mind to make individual choices, Tagore, Ibsen, and Pinter were of varied opinions and saw these qualities as their strength rather than weaknesses. G.B. Shaw, in his seminal play *Pygmalion* (1916), champions a woman's right to exercise her own agency through the portrayal of Eliza. He does not let Eliza remain in the shadow of Higgins as his prized possession, but gives her a dignified closure where she marries the man of her choice. Tagore's Labonno in *Shesher Kobita* (1929), epitomises a New Woman who asserts her pragmatic mind rather than being overwhelmed by emotions while choosing her husband when she realises that the love of her life, Amit, can never give her the emotional stability that a woman needs. Similarly, Mrinal from 'The Wife's Letter' (1914/2000) establishes her authority of choice to leave her husband's house when she realizes how narrow-minded and heartless they are towards the daughters-in-law of the family. Ibsen's Nora from *A Doll's House* (1879/1998) and Pinter's Ruth from *The Homecoming* (1965) choose a similar fate by claiming their individual rights to choose to live on their own terms. Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen* (2003/2006) and again Tagore's 'The Exercise-Book' (n.d./2000), on the other hand, delineate how the patriarchy operates to stunt the female growth of any form. While Dattani uses the symbol of the 'bonsai

plant' (p. 15) in his play to depict the systematic crippling of female growth characterised through Dolly and Alka, Tagore symbolises intellectual transgression through Uma's exercise book, which is wiped out by her husband, Pyarimohan, when he seizes it from her. The authorial voice, thus, ironically retorts –

Pyarimohan had an exercise book too, filled with barbed essays expounding his elaborate theories. But there was no benefactor of humankind to seize that book and destroy it. (Tagore, 2000, p. 50)

Another prominent figure, Satyajit Ray, cannot be missed to be mentioned when speaking of a man's perspective of his female characters. Although not in the capacity of a writer, his contribution to the poetic portrayal of assertive, determined, and empowered women characters on the silver screen has to be given its due credit. He was at some point severely criticised as anti-feminist for the absence of any female figure in the *Feluda* and the *Gupi Bhagha* series. However, it seems that these criticisms have been made by those who are not really acquainted with his complete oeuvre. His films like *Apur Sansar* (1959), *Devi* (1960), and *Mahanagar* (1963), amongst others, have strong characters such as Aparna, Doyamoyee, and Arati, who are the quintessential feminine figures like Milton's Eve, yet they do not conform to the social exceptions. Aparna, in *Apur Sansar*, cooks for her poor husband, Apu, serves him when he returns from office, fans him while he eats, and yet coyly enjoys when Apu sleepily fans her back while she eats; she does not hurriedly tell him to go to bed, as he might be tired. These subtle depictions prove to be a powerful nudge on the age-old patriarchal conventions that promote the notion of an 'ideal wife' who prioritises husbands' comfort over everything else. In *Devi*, Doyamoyee, even while being fully aware that staying back at her in-laws would bring havoc in her life, as she is believed to be the incarnation of Goddess Kali by her father-in-law, she refuses to leave with her husband, fearing that her departure might cause harm to the villagers and her family. What is most interesting here is that her husband, who is an educated, enlightened man, does not rebuke her superstition or even force her; he respects her choice. This dignified portrayal of marital relationship feels like a breath of fresh air against the other regressive ones in which the husband is depicted as a godly-figure who has to be revered and not questioned, let alone refused.

In contemporary society, where the trend of spreading hate against the opposite gender has escalated exponentially, it is very important that we analyse things rationally and not impulsively. Rejecting Homer and Milton for their anti-feminist portrayal and entirely dismissing their literary genius might seem like the right thing to do, but that would again be a parochial way of looking at things. Without the negative connotations, we would not have been able to make an analogy and appreciate the portrayals by Chaucer or Ray, who treated their women characters with empathy and deconstructed the standards of patriarchal expectations. These authors disprove Beauvoir's (2010) generalisation that men represent the world "from their own point of view, which they confound with absolute truth" (p. 196). Instead, they toil to understand and represent women subjectively and not distantly. One needs to, thus, consider Bacon's perspective along with Tagore's and Hardy's, along with Lorca's, and only then can one get a comprehensive idea about the evolution of how women have been portrayed in men's eyes through the ages. In doing so, the journey of the female figure may be traced from being overtly flat characters lacking any form of depth or psychological complexity to being depicted as self-asserting ones possessing moral ambiguity in their character.

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