

## A STUDY ON THE DEPICTIONS OF WOMEN AND GENDER ROLES IN LITERATURE

**Dr. S. Revathi**

Assistant Professor, Department of English  
Srinivasan College of Arts and Science, Perambalur.

Article History: Received: 29.03.2023 | Accepted: 18.04.2023 | Published: 22.04.2023

Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56602/TDJ>

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56602/TDJ/12.1.1636-1640>

### ABSTRACT

This paper explores how authors and characters see themselves and how society perceives them in the light of their gender. Sex, gender, and sexuality have a range of effects on narrative texts and readers' perceptions of them. Gender roles are societal expectations of the two sexes that guide individual behaviour. It is important to understand that sex, gender, and sexuality are separate ideas. The fundamental sex characteristics, a biological concept, define sex. Gender refers to the identities, viewpoints, and roles that individuals ascribe to the distinct sexes. The term *sexuality* describes the orientation of desire towards a specific sex. Due to rigid gender norms, heterosexual white men were given preference over other groups of people in the system. It affected people's access to jobs, financial aid, and education.

**Keywords:** Gender, Narrative Structures, Feminist, Indian Short -Story Writers

Authors can use literature as a powerful instrument to either support or criticise gender stereotypes that are unique to a particular time and place. Because of these factors, literature provided a favourable environment for the development of gender criticism. This field of study had a tremendous impact on how people perceived gender roles. Gender critique, a kind of literary criticism, looks at how societies use symbols to define and impose traits that are gender-specific. It deals with several issues, such as:

- Language that is gendered. For instance, it entails using the masculine pronouns to refer to people in general (he, him, his). The historical patriarchy, in which being a man was the norm and being a woman was viewed as deviant, is to blame for this predisposition.
- Identification. Male protagonists were typically the main characters in order to showcase their masculinity and physical domination. Women's characters were compelled to bow to authority without the chance for freedom or independence.

- How the author's gender is viewed by readers. When it came to authoring their own stories, men had a distinct advantage. Women's writing, on the other hand, was disparaged, treated unfairly, and subjected to harsh criticism. So, in order to have a chance of professional acceptability among writers, they had to publish under a masculine alias.

### **The Usage of Gender Stereotypes in Literature**

For a very long time, only the biographies of men were featured in history books; women's stories were not. Due to the rarity of female authors, the majority of works with female protagonists portrayed them as traditional characters.

Novels with Reverse Gender Roles. In a time when men were believed to be able to make clear decisions and women were believed to be submissive and docile, Shakespeare challenges the traditional view of genders. The two main antiheroes in his play Macbeth are a meek man and his domineering wife. He shows two people who are against following societal conventions. Shakespeare's characters displayed both masculinity and femininity to show that persons of either gender could possess the two contrasting qualities in his creations.

### **The Portrayal of Women in Literature**

In the sections that follow, we will discuss how literary representation of women has evolved over time. We will also look at cases where the authors were marginalised because of the time they lived in. Their courage and vision had a significant positive impact on the literary world and beyond. During the Middle Ages, women were seen as second-class citizens, and their needs were mostly ignored. Women were prominently included in many literary works despite the inequality. The Virgin is a pure lady whose only purpose in life is to be married; the Mother is a woman who does everything to help her children and her partner; the Predator is a lethal but wonderfully alluring woman whose only purpose in life is to be married. This function is connected to the pain/pleasure conundrum in Gothic literature, which is the never-ending quest for happiness that prevents one from reaching it.

The victim is helpless and frail. In this position, the male heroes have a person to save. Women who play this role typically have the capacity for monstrous empathy. Many Gothic writers distinguished between the two. Usually, they did it to draw attention to the suffering of gender-bound women. For instance, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is a story about a female psychosis brought on by patriarchal oppression. Many gothic women authors were adept at capturing feminine sexuality and domestic imprisonment in vivid and

interesting ways. The Bronte sisters, Mary Shelley, and Ann Radcliffe were among the authors who helped increase the readership of women's literature. Throughout international literature, there are a lot of powerful female characters. These fictional women defied gender expectations by taking a radical stance for themselves.

In 1859, black women writers made their debut due to a broader resurgence of black literature. Their quest for freedom and equality, as well as their opposition to racism and slavery, were expressed via writing. Incidents in the *Life of a Slave Girl*, written by Harriet Jacobs in the middle of the 19th century, provided as a groundbreaking example of the ability of a black woman to overthrow oppression. Throughout the 20th century's civil rights struggle, more black women painters emerged.

Grendel's mother from Beowulf is an illustration of an archetype female figure in mediaeval literature. She subverts society's beliefs by shielding her son, who is a foe of humankind. Female characters in Gothic literature were freed from sexist restrictions. Also, it enhanced a plot's complexity and tension. Gothic fiction features two significant female characters: a predator and a victim.

Black women's literature had a significant influence on African-American women's consciousness and influenced many individuals all over the world. The most significant piece of African-American literature produced in the latter half of the 20th century was Toni Morrison's slave book *Beloved*. Generations of women writers in the twenty-first century have been influenced by Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. We will examine a few classic literary works that illustrate typical gender norms in the parts that follow. The concept of masculinity and femininity will be put to the test as a result of this analysis.

*The Yellow Wallpaper*, the gothic story by Charlotte Gilman is an early feminist critique of Victorian Patriarchy. The author describes a woman who was subjected to a Victorian "rest-cure," which drove her insane. According to the article from *The Conversation*, ladies with nervous problems were given "rest-cures," which were periods of inactivity. Charlotte Gilman was given this treatment by herself. *The Yellow Wallpaper's* personal element is interesting, but the symbolism gives the narrative a lot more depth. The husband of the narrator confines his "hysterical" wife to a nursery with yellow walls. The position of women inside the institution of marriage is criticised by Charlotte Gilman using the comparison of entrapment. Overall, the narrator's husband's restrictions motivated her. She feels compelled to suppress her emotions and adopt a quiet attitude. The only area that

the protagonist can control is her obsessive imagination, thus, she is left with little alternative but to withdraw there.

### **Theme of Gender in *Othello***

Shakespeare highlights the negative impacts of gender stereotypes in the well-known play *Othello* by contrasting male and female characters. Men's misconceptions about women and women's inability to protect themselves from social criticism are the two key topics of Shakespeare's play. Othello murders his wife due of unfounded fears that Desdemona was unfaithful. These accusations come from Iago, a misogynist who is jealous of Othello's friendship with Desdemona. The Moor is killed because he is unable to recognise his deceiver and put his trust in his devoted, innocent wife.

Where did Othello's anxieties originate, then? Males who exhibited qualities often associated with women, such as empathy and trust, were stigmatised by the culture at the time as being weak. Othello had these qualities, which made him a victim of his own insecurity. He is both a prime example of toxic masculinity and a casualty of the real patriarchy. Gender is just one of the play's many fascinating issues.

### **Quotes on Gender in *Othello***

Here are a few meaningful quotes from *Othello* for you to analyze and see what toxic masculinity is all about:

Reputation, reputation, reputation! Oh, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial.

(*Othello*, Act 2 Scene 3)

Men in rage strike those that wish them best.

(*Othello*, Act 2 Scene 3)

O curse of marriage, that we can call these delicate creatures ours  
And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad  
And live upon the vapor of a dungeon  
Than keep a corner in the thing I love  
For others' uses. Yet 'tis the plague of great ones;  
Prerogated are they less than the base.  
'Tis destiny unshunnable, like death.

(*Othello* Act 3 Scene 3)

### **Gender Roles in *To Kill a Mockingbird***

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a story about a wrongly accused black man and a lawyer confronting racial injustice. It also focusses on the journey of a girl named Scout who challenges gender stereotypes and wants to be a tomboy. Harper Lee explores the overcomplicated social hierarchy of the Southern American society through differences in status. The rigid social divisions led to a man being falsely accused of rape because of the color of his skin.

In this setting, society dictates what is suitable for each gender. As a result, people rarely cross the barrier between masculinity and femininity. Scout Finch rejects the feminine in her because she wants to grow up on her own terms. She sees femininity as a trap and believes that masculinity does not have as many rules. Scout's view of femininity changes when she learns that being a woman takes just as much courage as being a man.

### **REFERENCES**

Alexander, Jacqui M. and Chandra Mohanty Talpade eds. *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. London: Routledge, 1997. Print.

Butler Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988): 519-31. Web. 12 Aug. 2014.

Campt Tina and Deborah A. Thomas. "Gendering Diaspora: Transnational Feminism, Diaspora and its Hegemonies." *Feminist Review*. 90 (2008):1-4. Web. 6 Aug. 2014.