



Feminist Literary Review: Women in 19th Century Popular Fictions

Dr. Kavitha k

Government First Grade College Devanahalli (Rural) Bangalore-562110

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Abstract

“Troubled times breed reflective thinkers” This statement directly connects to the fictional writers of its time and orders. It fits to interpret the depiction of women characters in the light of feminist approach. Fictional novels inevitably shape the explanatory logic of ‘*Modernity*’. Women characters reveal the inescapable presence of Position and power in the lime light of modernity. This concept frequently engages the exercise of empowering and powerful roles particularly in popular fictions. A few fictions come under the category of feminist approach. Women character particularly in 1980s to 90s had a keen strategical approach projecting them as warriors and their struggles to culminate the conventional and guise audaciousness to Modernity. A few novels had propagated women character projecting their thirstiness for power and freedom from the clutches of the past disabilities of domestication and patriarchal codes. Indeed, women character roles of the Mid-20th century novels are strongly related to the myths of the past to reckon the situational factors challenging the present norms of liberty. Their reasons and perceptions for survival are associate with willingness for economic independence, bound by a sense of individuality and self, and desire advancement of education and career. The existing tension of the society, anxiety and doubts of the individual, solitude and ambiguity of the transition imposed by the *survival schemes* are the binding factors reasoned by the situational demands. It seemed women were compressed by such tensions and vandalized their *self-identity*. They are extremely challengeable seeking wider scope of interpreting the concept of female heroism. Hence, certain themes allocated to these character roles compromise our understanding for acceptance of the challenges and the changes incorporating a new vision model of the current scenario.

Introduction

*“Troubled times breed reflective thinkers”*¹ This statement directly connects to the fictional writers of its time and orders. It fits to interpret the depiction of women characters in the light of feminist approach. Writer who works on a particular theme tries to make sense of the world he/she lives in. Their effort to make understand the changes and the challenges tries to illuminate new orders by allocating his characters for conciliation. They project them either with cautions or acceptance by giving dignity to their role of performances. Hence, certain themes allocated to these character roles compromise our understanding for acceptance of the challenges and the changes incorporating with a new vision or models of the current scenario. Fictional novels inevitably shape this

explanatory logic of '*Modernity*'. Women characters reveal the inescapable presence of Position and power in the lime light of modernity. This concept frequently engages the exercise of empowering powerful roles. A few interesting fictions of the Mid-20th Century comes under the category of feminist approach which has been the focus of this paper.

Women character particularly in 1960s to 80s had a keen strategical approach projecting them as warriors and their struggles to culminate the conventional and guise audaciousness in popular fictions. A few novels had certainly propagated women character and their projection under the theme of ambitiousness which emphasis their thirstiness for power and freedom from the clutches of the past disabilities of domestication and patriarchal codes. Indeed, women character roles of the mid-20th century novels are strongly related to the myths of the past, and to reckon with the situational factors, challenging of the present norms of liberty. Their reasons and perceptions for survival are associate with willingness for economic independence, bound by a sense of individuality and self, and desires for advancement in education and career. The prevailing tensions of the society, anxiety and doubts of the individual, solitude and ambiguity of the transitions are imposed by the *survival schemes* which were the binding factors reasoned by the situational demands. It seemed women were compressed by such tensions and vandalized their *self-identity*. They are extremely challengeable seeking wider scope of interpreting the concept of '*female heroism*'. On the echelon they differ profoundly as variable patters. But women have analogous stories when it comes for them to be identified as heroes.

The journey of female heroism tends to be more dramatic representations in the novels. For Chambal, it was very metaphorical to put forth his ideas about the *Hero with a Thousand Faces* in a nutshell of the journey in exploring the power and myth of storytelling from the ancient world to the contemporary times. This novel straddling around the human culture and the world, Chamble wants to acknowledge the bravery and valor of a hero who risks his life to transforms himself as a hero. To quote Chambal's statement that "**a hero ventures forth from the world of the commons day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.**"² It's understood that heroes were important to Campbell because, to him, they conveyed universal truths about one's personal self-discovery, self-transcendence, one's role in society, and inclusively, the relationship between the two sexes. The question that had been raised about *masculine journey* in the monomyth of the hero's Journey in *Hero with a Thousand Faces* was not altogether true because in Campbell's scheme men and women were not differentiated and might be this was the reason that he never specified *women* in specific. Later in his life he expressed that "*all of the great mythologies and much of the mythic story-telling of the world are from the male point of view. When I was writing "The Hero with a Thousand Faces" and wanted to bring female heroes in, [but] I had to go to the fairy tales.*"³

In general, the word "hero" refers the origin of male clan. We know that throughout centuries women were treated as the '*second sex*'. Though, some of the novels discussed by the proximity of strong character roles, the concepts of '*New Woman, Super Woman*' and *Modern Woman* were recognized as '*invisible heroines*'. However, they represented their heroic deeds; they are the fallen women who were the victims of male heroic social code. Their heroic deeds "*drove them to commit insane acts or to view life [as] utterly senseless*".⁴ However, their representation never marked full progression yet, they set a platform for female heroism. The

concept of “*female heroism*” encounters gender stereotypes. Females who were in higher position equal to males had been criticized as the products of feminists which had a very bad impact over their personality. It was important to see that the difference between the heroic or unheroic applauses were not obviously great, if recognized by the importance of intellectuality between the sexes. “*It should no longer be understood those traits as a deviation of sex. In this context, we could assert women “have the perfect right to be proud of being a woman, just as man [being] proud of his sex.”*”⁵ Forces that helped bring recognition for women as heroes was the perceptions that engaged by feminists to see women not as inferiors rather than intellectuals. Our heroes do change as the perceptions of reality changes. A contemporary example of the shifts and changes in heroic perception is that of a woman dominating mainly with her economic independence, and in the social and the political domains. This transformation became a new spectrum by eliminating the past conservative shackles. The book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) Betty Friedan also tried to agitate changes in women’s position in contrast of the past and deplored to say: “*In the fifties social forces and mass media revived the cult of domesticity; and the ideal of ultra- feminity formed a wide spread and influential tyranny of acceptable female images, shaping the behavior and self-image of average women of every age; in sixties new female images emerged to challenge the middle class conventions and shock many women of older generations.*”⁶ Thus, women became more creative and expressive in fictions and non-fictional novels. Creativity may also cause the rules and values to change over time. As our culture identifies change with rebels, it was women who acquired the prominence for such transformations. Women characters are created to play the dual roles equal to masculine virtues in popular fictions.

Depiction of Women in 19th Century Popular Fictions

The 19th century was remarked as the “*golden age*” of English literature. Gaskell gained a special space in terms of social reforms. She projected the psychological realism in the novel *Ruth* (1853). This novel received a critical reception says Gaskell that in her own family they named this novel as a “*prohibited book*” since it dealt with seduction and illegitimacy. Gaskell loads this character with so many extenuating circumstances and Ruth was seen as a “*fallen women*” which was compared with the novels “*The scarlet Letter*” (1850) and later Hardy’s “*Tess of the d’Urbervilles*” (1891) But Gaskell’s treatment of her heroine Ruth differs so much from that of the Hardy’s Tess, where Ruth’s guilt, regression and her struggles seems to expiate her sins while Hardy is less inclined to view Tess as a sinner. There was an inclination that novels written by women had a different tension of articulation by its own impulsiveness than compared to the male writers of the time. The misogynistic view was evident by in male writers by directly hitting the passive qualities of womanhood with their characterization while women writers embraced the themes that revolved around their struggles to overcome the staggering challenges pertained to patriarchy.

The novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847) had the same implications by the character portrayal of Catherine Earnshaw who finds difficulty to live by the pressures of the traditional society. She refuses the social mores of her traditional marriage. Emily Bronte succeeded in laying the bare and the benevolent truth of women’s “self” and fits Catherine to the phrase “*woman of her rights*”. Obviously, this was the situation practically faced by

women during the early twentieth century apparently, breaking the conventional ideas of marriage, child birth, family, and laws of patriarchy. The deepest truth that Mary Wollstonecraft visualized was “ *A profound conviction that the neglected education of my fellow-creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore....women in particular, are rendered weak and wretched by a variety of concurring causes,.....the conduct and manners, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity.*”⁷

Women in fiction were considered as ‘objects’ rather than ‘subjects’, whose roles were in need for only their reproductivity, domestic services, and sexuality. Many writers gave only common roles to play as wives and mothers for their heroes which examined their canonical works to show how gender stereotypes involved in their functioning. “Women as a subject” in fiction came into existence by the bang of ‘Industrial Revolution’ which emerged during the 19th century. The onset of the industrial revolution marked a major turning point in human history where major diversions of changes occurred by socio, economic and cultural compilation. Henry James’s *Daisy Miller*, (1878) was the first novel to acknowledge the “New Women” Concept. Harry McVickar’s “*The myth of the American Girl*”, had a huge impact with this character Daisy. William Dean Howells noted that the character Daisy was rejected by many American women and criticized Henry James for projecting the character Daisy as a curious mixture of traits. It was said that the male writers were “*Too jealous of her own perfection to allow that innocence might be reckless, and angels in their ignorance of evil might not behave as discreetly as worse people.*”⁸ The ‘New Women’ concept was so satirical to see that the “*New Woman was all too like the legendary charmer in her egotism, willful selfishness, and the calculation of her attempts to take command of men and society.*”⁹

Consistently, Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1847) was also one of the vibrating novels with symbolic overtones mirroring the era of transitions. Emma Bovary was poised to take over the male prerogative sexual freedom while, the social norms forced her to receive the feminine passiveness. Flaubert’s contemporary Charles Baudelaire narrated Emma as “*almost masculine and that, perhaps, unconsciously, the author had bestowed on her all the qualities of manliness.*”¹⁰ However, the novel endorsed strong criticism for showing Emma with masculine qualities, her role stood almost like a revolution breaking the root causes of women’s subordination. In this context, Sarah Grimke’s *Letters on Equality* presents the most contingent argument where she hit the root cause of women’s subordination to state that “*According to the principle which I have laid down, that man and woman were created equal, and endowed by their beneficent creator with the same intellectual powers and the same moral responsibilities, and that consequently whatever is morally right for a man to do, is morally right for a woman*”¹¹

The novel *Anna Karenina* (1877) deplores struggles between relational values and social pressures of identity. Woman’s submissiveness to domestic obligations were perceived as deep paradoxes. Anna is seen as a woman of her own identity who chooses passion as natural desire of life. The irony is that, though she never cared for the hollowness of the societal triumphs, social orders and prestige, she was tortured by her own pride. She was paralyzed by maternal guilt. Finally, her quest for morality promotes her to commit suicide. The novel

exposed the typical situation of women's crucial situation passing through serious surveillance of changes. It was evident by the implication of the early twentieth century, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony fought for women's liberty which was the major issue of the Fifteenth Amendment in law where the word "**Woman**" was inscribed in the American constitution. Stanton thinks each woman as an imaginary Robinson Crusoe and further details that "**women should have their self-power and seek solitude, in a world of her own [and] of her own destiny**"¹²

Stephen Crane's novel *Maggie: A Girl of the Street* (1893) describes the revolutionary strategies enforced on women's status. Maggie reveals the working-class struggle and portrays the ugliness and despair of the male domination. To focus on Linda David critique of Stephen Crane, commented that "It was a time of dramatic change of the World War I that woman shifted their position from the "**angels of the house**" to the "**whores of the street**".¹³ The pride of patriarchy was at its peak during the late nineteenth century. Women's survival conditions stood discrepancy to ethical values. Maggie pictured the real situation of a woman's plight caught up in the cycle of violence and prostitution. Her dreams for good life like *Moll Flanders* never really materialized in the world of man-made rules. It is seen that, in the 1980s the anti-discrimination policy, traffic in prostitution took effective steps preventing sexual exploitations in work place for women employees. As Janice Wood Wetzel observes: "**Upon these women we have no right to turn our backs. They have been created by the very injustice against which we protest.**" (Wetzel, 44) "**The second-class status of women imposed by cultural constraints of such a socio-economic reality limits progress, regardless of gains**" (Wetzel, 34-35) "**Forced prostitution, a form of slavery imposed on women by procurers, is a result of economic degradation. Process of rapid urbanization and migration, resulting in further underemployment and unemployment, compounds their condition and sometimes leads to prostitution.**" (Wetzel, 47) "**Complementary strategies for the elimination of women's secondary status, therefore, are needed. Equal recognition of women's informal and invisible economic contribution to the mainstream of society must go hand in hand with the sharing of the domestic responsibilities by all family members, including men**" (Wetzel, 35)¹⁴

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) laid tremendous stress on the impact of female resistance and gender inequality. Edna Pontellier struggles against the rigid social institutions. The novel shows the real side of female power symbolically stating "**the bird that flies high must have strong wings.**"¹⁵ Edna Pontellier as a 'caged bird' bound by domestication tries to overcome her imprisonment. However, Edna was able to find her inner strength and take necessary steps to improve her "self"; but her intolerable submission to domestication leads her to commit suicide rather than defeat. Thus, women in fiction particularly referred to the 19th century novels made tremendous efforts for the shifts and changes by the cultural and societal norms. Paul Bourget, and Scot James Fullarton Muirhead (foreigners) who made important documentation about '*American life*, investigated the novels for factual details of the social conditions of changes. Paul Bourget, in his *Outré-Mer: Impressions of America (1895) made observations on the representational types in the novels.*"¹⁶ He found "American women" represented in the novels are the most visible aspect in the social scene. He visualized the myth of American beauty which played a keen role in women characterization. His question was based on women's intellectuality which stood an open-ended issue of the era.

Scot James Fullarton Muirhead who published the *Land of Contrast: A Briton's View of His American kin* also came out with the same argument of women's role in the novels. He declared that 'American women' perhaps can "*almost [be] called as casuals*." Muirhead found the very interesting fact that "almost every novel in United States explicitly devotes to the female citizen and yet, their representations express as "*women on the grounds of struggle, survival and dependency*."¹⁷ He also noted that "*they had no direct reference as voters, doctors, lawyers, competitor of man*."¹⁸ Later by the mid-twenties women were recognized as individual characters and their roles were interpreted by emphasizing the concept of "*Modern Women*". Education, empowered women's liberation and affirmed many changes to their status. Jane Sherron De Hart in *Women's America* of 1960s pointed out that: "*Women's liberationists were younger women, often less highly educated, whose ideology and political styles, shaped in the dissent and violence of the 1960s, led them to look at women's predicament differently. Instead of relying upon traditional organizational structure and lobbying techniques, they developed a new style of politics. Instead of limiting their goals to changes in public policy, they embraced a transformation in private, domestic life as well. They sought liberation from ways of thinking and behaving they believed stunted or distorted women's growth and kept them subordinate to men. Through their extension of their own personal liberation, they hoped to remake the male world, changing it as they had changed themselves. For women's liberationists as for women's rights advocates, however, the first step toward becoming feminists demanded a clear statement of women's position in society, one that called attention to the gap between the egalitarian ideal and the actual position of women in American culture*"¹⁹

In the late nineteenth century, the impact of industrial revolution further, altered the economic systems and women's role. By the early twentieth century it was generally considered as a true beginning for improvement strategies regarding women at 'Work Places. Women played important roles at the work place and became the major motivating force influencing towards changes. Sandra Gilbert in *The Madwomen in the Attic* (1979) noticed that women were: "*...the images on the surface of the glass, with, that is those mythic masks male artists have fastened over human face both to lessen their dread of her "inconsistency" and – by identifying her with the "eternal types" they have themselves invented – to possess her more thoroughly*."²⁰ However, a change by nature took place with regard to the depiction of women characters by the authors of 20th century. Gradually, "women" of the 21st century emphasized greatly to the shifts and changes with regard to their position and professions. According to Jane Adams, the subject of women was "*getting beyond a sense of one's own limitations being curious about everything*."²¹ The mid-twentieth decades put forward the resistance of competitive power structures. Thus, industrial revolution became a hallmark in history considering to many changes.

Conclusion

Nevertheless, we had female heroines' women characters who were portrayed very much capable of overthrowing the conservative shackles that caused humiliation towards their position. They found that the true power and potentiality had its roots within their "self" which was submerged by the social pressures and superstitious beliefs. Thus, Feminism entangled by domesticity but, making effort seeking liberty through their professional success.

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