



Women in British Fiction Stereotypical Vs Multi-Dimensional Portrayal

- Disha Vegad • Mahpara Kabir • Megha Harsh
- Sister Nelsa A.C.

Received : November 2016

Accepted : March 2017

Corresponding Author : **Sister Nelsa A.C.**

Abstract : *Since the dawn of civilisation, women have always been portrayed as the weaker sex. The representation of women by male authors has always been in the extreme—either as benevolent and complacent creatures or vile and wicked vamps. It can be said that male writers like Charles Dickens and Henry Fielding, among others, did not try much to probe into the psyche of the characters they wrote about. The portrayal of their characters was biased and male-centred, adhering to the norms of the patriarchal society. The literary works of male authors describing experience from a male point of view was considered the standard of universality.*

But, with the emergence of women writers, the stereotypical image of women changed and a more realistic image of women was brought forth by writers like Jane Austen and George Eliot, among others. They were more sympathetic towards their female characters and viewed them from a different angle. Though they had to face a lot of difficulties initially, with time and constant struggle, they succeeded in establishing a realistic image of women, opposed to that created by their male counterparts.

Keywords : *Stereotypes, Multi-dimensional, Condition of women.*

Disha Vegad

B.A. III year, English (Hons.), Session: 2014-2017,
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Mahpara Kabir

B.A. III year, English (Hons.), Session: 2014-2017,
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Megha Harsh

B.A. III year, English (Hons.), Session: 2014-2017,
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Sister Nelsa A.C.

Assistant Professor, Department of English,
Patna Women's College, Bailey Road,
Patna—800 001, Bihar, India
E-mail: avilanelsa@gmail.com

Introduction:

The male writers were patriarchal and stereotypical in the presentation of their female characters and thus, they have been portrayed either in a very positive light or in a very negative light. It can be said that male writers like Charles **Dickens** and Henry **Fielding**, among others, portrayed them according to the male-centred worldview, either as angels and benevolent creatures who sacrificed their entire lives catering to the needs of their families, or as wicked vamps, who plotted against the other characters. They did not believe much in being sympathetic towards women and so, the women characters that they portrayed also failed to bring forth the realistic image of women.

The female characters of **Dickens and Fielding** in their works like **A Tale of Two Cities**, **Great**

Expectations, Tom Jones and **Shamela** are of a stereo-typical nature. They are either very complacent and virtuous or very wicked and hateful having all negative characteristics.

Before the centuries-old struggle for women's equality finally emerged in the late 1960's, the literary works of male authors describing experience from a male point of view were considered the standard of universality- that is, representative of the experience of all readers.

Objective:

The main objective of this research project is to focus on the portrayal of women in British fiction.

Our endeavour is to achieve the following objectives:

- The portrayal of women characters by prominent male writers like Charles Dickens and Henry Fielding, who tend to be stereotypical in their perception.
- The portrayal of women characters by female writers like Jane Austen and George Eliot who are more multi-dimensional in their perception.
- The difference in their views and perceptions regarding women.

Dickens has always adhered to the likes of the patriarchal society and thus, his female characters are a reflection of his male-centred views. He compartmentalized his female characters into two categories: as an epitome of womanhood and grace or vile and conniving creatures. In the novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, the women characters have an aura of unreality that emphasizes sentimentality instead of authentic emotion. Dickens created female characters who are designed to blossom only in domestic settings.

In his other novel, *Great Expectations*, he subverts stereotypical ideals of Victorian motherhood, femininity and masculinity while concurrently maintaining his characters within a strict framework of a gendered society in 19th century England.

"So proud, so proud," moaned Miss Havisham, pushing away her gray hair with both her hands.

"Who taught me to be proud?" returned Estella.

"Who praised me when I learnt my lesson?"
(Dickens, 376)

Henry Fielding is another writer who did not have significant female characters and considered them to be unimportant. In his novel *Shamela*, which is a parody of his counterpart Richardson's *Pamela*, he presented Shamela as a materialistic and conniving creature who could go to any extent for the fulfillment of her motives.

In *Tom Jones*, he presents two female characters. One is that of Sophia Western, who is a chaste and virtuous lady who cannot confess her feelings for the person she loved because that would have been considered indecent. The other female character mentioned in the novel is that of Mrs. Western, whose sole motive is to get Sophia settled into a rich family. Through her character, Fielding puts forth his view that a woman has no other and cannot have any other ambition in life apart from getting married to a well-to-do gentleman of a good social standing.

In the Victorian era, women were seen by the middle-class at least, as belonging to the domestic sphere, and this stereotype required them to engage themselves in domestic chores and rearing children, throughout their lives. Representations of ideal wives were abundant in Victorian culture, providing women with their role models. The Victorian ideal of the tirelessly patient, sacrificing wife is depicted in *The Angel in the House*.

But, with the entry of women authors in the field of fiction and literature, the stereotypical image of women that had been presented all these years, was finally altered. The publication of the works of the women authors paved the way for the establishment of a more multi-dimensional and sympathetic image of women, even by some the male authors, like Thomas Hardy and G.B.Shaw. They portrayed their women characters as independent and strong-willed as well as having benevolence and the capability to sacrifice at the same time.

Jane Austen in her works like *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* illustrates that women had the capability to think for themselves and govern their own lives. The heroines in Austen's novels are not immoral but they stand up for themselves and defy patriarchal figures and societal pressures within the novel.

The earliest readers of *Pride and Prejudice* were surprised that such a clever book could have been written by a woman. It is, of course, the book from which Austen's most famous lines come:

“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.” (Austen, 1)

George Eliot was another prominent writer who used her works of fiction as a tool to voice her concern about the women’s role and gender conflict in the society. She created female figures in order to prove that women are also endowed with wisdom and that they are capable of being reasonable and rational. She bravely challenged the society and supported women in terms of marriage, education and occupation. In her novels, the supportive and loving relationship proves itself to be truly rare, as that between *Lucy and Maggie in The Mill on the Floss*. Besides supportive and loving relationships, Eliot portrays a pattern that relationship between works to subvert the conventional structural imperative. In *Middlemarch*, Eliot portrays a different kind of female relationship between Dorothea and Celia a relationship as structuring the larger moral and philosophical issues.

Virginia Woolf was an English writer and one of the foremost modernists of the twentieth century. Her most famous works include the novels like *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To The Lighthouse*, *Orlando* and a book, a lengthy essay, *A Room Of One’s Own*.

“Lady Bruton had the reputation of being more interested in politics than people; of talking like a man; of having had a finger in some notorious intrigues of the eighties, which was now beginning to be mentioned in memoirs.” (Woolf, 137)

According to her, women were not allowed to write because of relative poverty, and financial development alone could provide the freedom, to write. She emphasizes the fact that, despite culturally enforced limitations, women used to find ways to express the profundity of their experiences.

Conclusion :

History is non-inclusive of women’s stories, largely because women have traditionally not been allowed to engage in writing history. The male authors presented their female characters in such a way that they were overshadowed by a stereotypical image. The patriarchal society looked down upon women and thought them to be meek and dependent on the males. Even if a woman was presented as a strong character, they did not approve of it and ultimately, the stereotypical representation of women continued. The male authors like **Charles Dickens** and **Henry Fielding**,

who promoted such portrayal of women, seldom tried to probe into the psyche of their female characters and presented them in the way they wanted to. The portrayal of their female characters was based on their male-centered perception.

But, with the entry of women authors in the field of fiction and literature, the stereotypical image of women that had been presented by their male counterparts all these years was shattered and the image of a strong, independent woman emerged. The female characters of the women authors did not mean to offend their male counterparts, rather, they intended to bring forth a more realistic image of women. The women authors delved into the psyche of their female characters and viewed them from a completely different outlook. The female characters of the women authors were strong, independent, free-willed and yet complacent and sacrificing at the same time. They believed in the concept of marriage not for the sake of a good social standing but for living a happy life with their beloved. They were free to take their own decisions and even confess their feelings for someone they loved.

The women authors had to face a lot of obstacles in order to shatter the stereotypical image of women created by their male counterparts. Some of them, like George Eliot, even wrote under the disguise of a pen name, so that they could be accepted by the society. But with time and constant struggle, they were able to overcome all the tribulations posed by the society and ultimately, they succeeded in their motive, which was, to present a realistic image of women to the society.

References:

- Dickens, Charles. (1980). *Great Expectations*. New Delhi : Oxford University Press
- Austen, Jane. (1982). *Pride and Prejudice*. New Delhi : Oxford University Press
- Woolf, Virginia. (1992). *Mrs. Dalloway*. New Delhi : Oxford University Press

Journals:

- Inquiries Journal
The Telegraph

Website:

- gem.greenwood.com, 8th September, 2016
google.com
wikipedia.com
inquiriesjournal.com, 15th September, 2016
goodreads.com, 22nd September, 2016