
A Critical Analysis of Writers Post Third Wave Feminism

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Abstract: *Inclusiveness in literature from a feminist perspective has been marred because of the ambivalent representation of women in literary works. The advent of the first wave of feminism during the 19th and early 20th century, paved the way for women to assert their rights to vote. The second wave of feminism (1960s-1980s) broadened to a wider assertion of women rights including demystifying socially constructed gender norms and inclusion of women as equals in construction of society. The third wave of feminism (1990s-2000s) became more inclusive as it included the marginalised section of women (women and girls of colour) who felt the first two waves failed to include them. The third wave significantly manifested the position of women represented in literature and works of literature. Various literary works produced after the third wave of feminism took a paradigm shift; women were no longer represented through the socially constructed gender norms but as having an identity of their own. It focused more on the individual self and the sexual liberation of women vis-à-vis reclamation strategy of finding one's own way through sexual liberation. The objective of this critical analysis is to show how the feminist movement changed the way women have been represented in literature and literary works post third wave feminism.*

Keywords- *Inclusiveness, Feminism, Gender Norms, Literature*

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusiveness as defined in Cambridge Dictionary means the quality of including different types of people and treating them all fairly and equally. In this context, women's plight of inclusiveness in literature has been an on-going struggle since time immemorial. It can be exemplified through the examples of writers who were predominantly male and the representations of women by them were biased. Women were considered as sub-ordinate to men in a male dominated society as a result women writers and their representation in literature were often ignored and were represented mostly as objects of desire and powerless.



This is elucidated in Spenser's epic poem *The Faerie Queene* where the implied male speaker is given more importance as seen in the first line of the poem (Yadav, 2020). Women characters in this epic poem are depicted as lovely and principled, Una and Caelia and the others as licentious and evil, Errour, Pride, and Duessa. In Donne's poetry, women have been projected as the object or reflection of male desire and a sex object for men to gather to the erotic needs of Donne's male clique (Bell, 2006) The women in Donne's poetry are silent and do not have a voice of their own as seen in his poems *The Flea* and *Elegy XIX. Donne's Elegie: To His Mistress Going to Bed* is an example of male desire and his narcissistic objectification of women as mere objects. These texts have significantly failed to represent women as well rounded characters in comparison to the men who took pride in their superior standing in society and also took pride in their masculine power. Education was available only for women of the higher ranks and was perceived as only an addition to their primary learning of needlework, painting and music (Ramdev, 2002). From a feminist point of view, inclusiveness is not achieved in these texts rather it becomes the primary objective of men to gain authority of women by objectifying women's body as a something to be attained by their lovers. The textbook definition of feminism can be defined as the treatment of all genders as equal and having equal rights and opportunities. According to philosophers and scholars, feminism has a deeper meaning, it is a belief that women are subjugated and this subjugation is unwarranted (James, 1998). (Hoffman, 2011) stated that feminism has more than one meaning, it can be identified through its multiple forms i.e., liberal, socialist, radical, empiricist, standpoint or post-modern feminism.

Representation of women in literature

The domination of women by men has affected the way literature has represented women (Arizah, 2020). Women characters in literature were typically projected as having the duty to adhere to the expectations of the society as seen in the Victorian period. The women of the Victorian society were expected to learn housewife skills, were not encouraged to have an education and discouraged to have a voice of their own since the society was patriarchal (Appell, n.d.). They were considered as symbols of purity and morality and thus were expected to refrain from expressing sexuality. Their lives were confined to the four walls of the home and they were expected to carry out their domestic duties as a dutiful daughter or wife. The 19th century society considered expression of sexuality by women as inappropriate and men considered it as their duty to protect women from it.

Towards the end of the 18th century, a group of writers emerged whose writings disseminated the idea of feminism for next generation of writers. Among them, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is considered as a treatise which threw light on the subjugation of women in a male dominated society. She wrote about how men and women have the same ability to reason, and so both should have equal rights in terms of acquiring education. Women have always been considered as inferior to men and thus denied the right to education, however; this very denial of education is the reason why women appear to be less smart than men. Women, according to her are treated as sub-ordinate beings whose only important roles were to take care of their appearances and accept their subordinate position. Since education is denied to them, they lack the tools to vindicate their rights and their perception of their capabilities remains limited. She argues that this wrong



perception of women as inferior stem from the way society treats women, placing them in a low status and denying them education.

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) is considered as the first major work in feminist literary criticism. Woolf wrote about how the deprivation of a room of one's own hinders the literary progress of a woman as she is constantly being interrupted. Woolf wrote that intellectual freedom is directly proportional to material things and the creation of poetry depends upon intellectual freedom and this can be achieved by having access to money. She asserted that women since the beginning of time has been poor and with this the writer emphasises that a woman needs money to get a room of her own so that she can rise up to her male counterparts. In short, she encourages women to write for financial independence.

Feminism waves and its impact on status of women in literature

The period of first wave of feminism spanned from 19th to early 20th century in the United Kingdom and United States, propagated that women need to fulfil their potential and not only their equality. The first wave fostered promotion of equality and property rights for women and the objection of chattel marriage which gave husbands ownership of married women and their children (Halířová, 2016). This gave rise to the suffrage movement, as a result, in 1918, the Representation of the People Act granted women who were over the age of 30 and owned houses the right to vote and in 1928, the right was extended to all women over the age of 21. After World War 2nd, women could sit in the parliament.

The second wave of feminism which begin around early 1960s till the late 1980s, centred on women rights including breaking down socially constructed gender norms, gaining legal and social equality and most importantly ending discrimination (Halířová, 2016). One of the most influential feminist, Simone de Beauvoir, in her essay *The Second Sex* said that gender is not determined by birth but rather one becomes it. Thus the second-wave feminist activists tried to break down socially constructed gender norms and fought for inclusion of women as equals in construction of society.

The third wave of feminism (1990s-2000s) activist focused on gender, racial, economic and social justice. It included the marginalised section of women (women and girls of colour) as the first two waves did not adequately represent their plights. The proponents of the third-wave feminism believed that women have all the potentials of achieving what men can but the opportunities to do so are denied to them. The third-wave feminism believed in the sexual liberation of women, they challenged the portrayal of women in literature, media and arts.

Writers Post Third Wave Feminism and their representation of women

The third wave significantly manifested the position of women represented in literature and works of literature. The women characters that emerged post third-wave feminism have an identity of their own and no longer confirmed to the gender norms that society constructed. It focused more on the individual self and the sexual liberation of women through reclamation strategy of finding one's own way through sexual liberation. For a woman, it is through shared experience of being of the same sex that one can understand and offer solidarity to each other (Offen, 1988). The ripple of the feminist movement affected the literary world and its effect transcended geographical borders. (Fisher, 1990) emphasized that if inclusion of women is not emphasized or observed the resultant will be continued exclusion of women.



Women writers in particular, were emancipated from the shackles of the patriarchal bondage that prevented them from representing strong women characters. Several works of literature are testaments of inclusiveness of strong women characters in literature post the third-wave feminism, some of which are Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* published in 1997, *Persepolis* an autobiographical graphic novel by Marjane Satrapi published in 2000 and *A Terrible Matriarchy* by Easterin Kire, published in 2007.

In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* published in 1997, the main protagonist of the novel Ammu experienced discrimination in her home because of her gender as her parents favored her brother Chacko. Deprived of love from her own parents, Ammu failed to show love to her children. As a young woman, Ammu longed to break away from the clutches of the discrimination she faced (p.39). Roy presented a strong woman protagonist who defied societal norms by marrying someone outside her faith, divorcing him and loving someone beneath her class. Unlike her mother who chose to stay with her husband, a drunkard, she came to realize that, she is someone who can never live her life in confinement and thus her marriage failed. Social institutions like family, marriage, religion and police discriminates Ammu and it is not only men but women at whose hands she suffers (Prakash and Sujata, 2016). Her death and burial represents the evil and sham of the society which was merciless to people who do not conduct themselves to societal norms. Ammu represents the subaltern who breaks away from the unwritten set of rules laid down by society which a woman was expected to follow; she rebelled against the expectations of society.

Persepolis published in 2000, is an autobiographical graphic novel by Marjane Satrapi which shows us the hardships that the author faced living in Iran as a woman. Throughout the novel Marji, the main protagonist, has a deep yearning to find a niche for herself in her family, among her friends and most importantly to her country. Unlike Ammu in *The God of Small Things*, her parents being liberal and realists allowed her to express her individuality since she was a child. Her parents have always encouraged her to take active part in their discussions regarding the political issues of that time. She is self-absorbed and intelligent who was always true to herself even if that meant getting into trouble just like Ammu. Meeting Reza, her marriage to him and the ultimate divorce aided her in discovering her true identity. She began to realize that being happy necessarily does not mean having to be tied down to someone, it is a state of mind which is not in any way linked to another individual and the ability to find oneself amidst the chaos of the world is truly rewarding in life.

A Terrible Matriarchy by Easterin Kire, published in 2007 is another example of a strong female protagonist Dielieno who faced discrimination because of her gender. The novel highlights the suffering of the women not only because of the patriarchal dominance but matriarchal dominance in a society (Kharbe, 2019). The story revolves around three generations of women: Grandmother, Mother and Dielieno and throws light on the various effects of patriarchy on the three characters. Grandmother represents the suppressed women who have been deeply consumed by the patriarchal laws, her preference of male child and her illiberal attitude towards Deilieno represents how the effects of patriarchy is deeply rooted in her. Her blind adherence to the patriarchal way of the society prevents her from seeing the psychological effect of its evil on young Deilieno. The character of Mother represents the passive woman in a patriarchal society who does not have a voice of her own. She represents the voiceless woman in a society



dominated by men and through her the writer show how patriarchy and discrimination deters women from having a voice of their own. Dielieno, represents the lone girl/woman who defied against the societal norms and gender based norms and represented the ‘new’ woman who does not succumb to the despotic tradition that limited her and her freedom. (Pou, 2015)

2. CONCLUSION

A look at the literary works mentioned in this paper shows women have been represented in literature through the ages. The biased and narcissistic objectification of women by various writers, have been slowly eradicated to some extent by the modern writers. Women writers in particular have found a voice of their own and the characters they write about echoes their voices. Women have always been underrepresented in literature but with the advent of the feminist wave particular the third wave of feminism, they have found the proper outlet to voice out about the subjugation and discrimination they faced through literature. Inclusiveness of women have group by leaps and bounds today compared to the past. Considered the torchbearers of an ideal traditional society, women have always been forced to uphold a set standard of values and most women in the past adhered to this but women now are fighting for their freedom from the shackles of patriarchy. Though the cost of freedom for women is still expensive, yet the spirit to find their true self-identity lives on through words which are meant to be spoken and heard.

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