

16. Literature and Gender

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Abstract

The study of literature and gender refers to the study of literary texts as they are read, written and interpreted within cultures by men and women. This issue has affected women for centuries and has manifested itself out of biased discrimination against women and this bias still continues in spite of women striving for equality since a long time. Even those critics who disapproved of changes in the doctrine of the two sexual spheres were far from advocating women's retirement from the literary field.

Keywords: Gender, Literature, British Women Novelists.

Gender discrimination or gender inequality did exist in literature like it did in every sphere of life. It took several years for women writers to come out with their publications by their own names, for a long time they had to hide their identity behind a masculine name. People could not digest the fact that a woman can exhibit her creative talent, because the society had restricted the women within the confines of the cradle to the kitchen. This issue has affected women for centuries and has manifested itself out of biased discrimination against women and this bias still continues in spite of women striving for equality since a long time.

The study of literature and gender refers to the study of literary texts as they are read, written and interpreted within cultures by men and women. In western culture blue color is assigned to boys while pink to girls. So gender can be read as sexual stereotypes. A woman novelist, unless she disguised herself with a male pseudonym, had to expect critics to focus on her femininity and rank her with the other women writers of her day, no matter how diverse their subjects or styles. Still we find the emergence of women writers in English literature as early as the 16th century examples are Mary Masters, Sarah Jennigs, Aphra Behn, Hennah More etc. Aphra Behn is said to be the first woman writer to earn her living by her pen. The knowledge that their individual achievement would be subsumed under a relatively unfavorable group stereotype acted as a constant irritant to feminine novelists. George Eliot protested against being compared to Dinah Mulock; Charlotte Brontë tried to delay the publication of *Villette* so that it

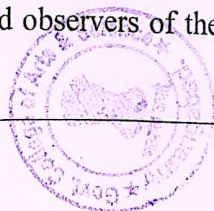
would not be reviewed along with Mrs. Gaskell's *Ruth*. Brontë particularly wanted to prevent the male literary establishment from making women writers into competitors and rivals for the same small space: "It is the nature of writers to be invidious," she wrote to Mrs. Gaskell, but "we shall set them at defiance; they *shall* not make us foes."

Women Novelists of the Victorian Age

Through the 1850s and 1860s there was a great increase in theoretical and specific criticism of women novelists. Hardly a journal failed to publish an essay on women's literature; hardly a critic failed to express himself upon its innate and potential qualities.

This situation, similar to the expanded market for literature by and about women in the late 1960s, suggests that the Victorians were responding to what seemed like a revolutionary, and in many ways a very threatening, phenomenon. As the number of important novels by women increased through the 1850s and 1860s, male journalists were forced to acknowledge that women were excelling in the creation of fiction, not just in England, but also in Europe and America. As it became apparent that Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth were not aberrations, but the forerunners of female participation in the development of the novel, jokes about dancing dogs no longer seemed an adequate response.

Even those critics who disapproved of changes in the doctrine of the two sexual spheres were far from advocating women's retirement from the literary field. The new questions of women's *place* in literature proved endlessly fascinating, and the Victorians approached them with all the weight of their religious commitments and their interest in the sciences of human nature. Although most periodical criticism, especially between 1847 and 1875, employed a double standard for men's and women's writing and seemed shocked or chagrined by individual women's failures to conform to the stereotypes, a few critics, notably G. H. Lewes, George Eliot, and R. H. Hutton, were beginning to consider what women as a group might contribute to the art of the novel. Victorian critics agreed that if women were going to write at all they should write novels. Yet this assessment, too, denigrated and resisted feminine achievement. Theories of female aptitude for the novel tended to be patronizing, if not downright insulting. The least difficult, least demanding response to the superior woman novelist was to see the novel as an instrument that transformed feminine weaknesses into narrative strengths. Women were obsessed by sentiment and romance; well, these were the staples of fiction. Women had a natural taste for the trivial; they were sharp-eyed observers of the social scene; they enjoyed getting involved in



other people's affairs. Most of the negative criticism tried to justify the assumption that novels by women would be recognizably inferior to those by men.

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Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign

Mrs. Gaskell had nothing of this passion and frustration of the Bronte sisters. She was the wife of a quiet Unitarian clergyman in Manchester-one of the buzzing centres of English industry. She was mother of seven children, and she had, according to Walte The Victorian era is known for the galaxy of female novelists that it threw up. They include Mrs. Trollope, Mrs. Gore, Mrs. Marsh Mrs. Bray, Mrs. Henry Wood, Charlotte Yonge, Mrs. Oliphant, Mrs. Lynn Lynfon, M. E. Braddon, "Ouida," Rhoda Broughton, Edna Lyall, and still many more now justly forgotten, but the four most important women novelists, who yet are quite important, are :

- (i) Charlotte Bronte (1816-1855)
- (ii) Emile Bronte (1818-1848)
- (iii) Mrs. Gaskell (1810-1865)
- (iv) George Eliot (1819-1880)

The three Bronte sisters-Anne, Charlotte, and Emily-collectively known often as the "stormy sisterhood," who took the England of their time by storm, were in actual life shy and isolated girls with rather uneventful lives. Charlotte Bronte in her novels revolted against the traditions of Jane Austen, Dickens, and Thackeray. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* she praised in glowing terms, but she herself never attempted anything of the kind.

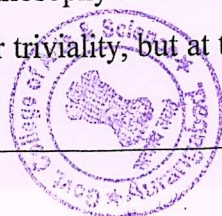
Mrs. Gaskell

Allen, "what may be called the serenity of the fulfilled" and accepted everything with the air of, what David Cecil calls, "serene satisfaction." Her sense of humour and deep human sympathy are obvious manifestations of her serenity.

r novels are novels not of manners but of passions and the naked soul.

George Eliot:

With George Eliot we come to the most philosophical of all the major Victorian novelists, both female and male. Philosophy is both her strength and weakness as a novelist. It keeps her from falling into pathos or triviality, but at the same time gives her art an ultra serious



and reflective quality which makes it "heavy reading." Even her humor-the faculty in which she doubtlessly is quite rich-has about it the quality of ponderous reflection

Conclusion:

Though the gender discrimination is diminishing gradually yet it is not rooted completely. Encouragement should be given to women to take up more challenging roles and thus prove their equality if not superiority.

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