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WOMEN IN WORLD CLASSICS- A BIRDS EYE –VIEW

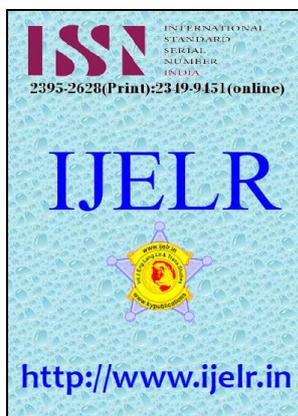
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ABSTRACT

From time immemorial, gender discrimination has remained an unwritten social code or even a legitimate convention all over the world. The various religions and communities of the world .The various religions and communities of the world have always held that women are subservient to men as members of a social order. While sex is the creation of god and sexual differences are essential for procreation, gender is the creation of man. It is the creation of patriarchy, and serves the male flair for domination. A patriarchal social set-up firmly asserts men’s superiority over women and is based not on mutuality but on oppression.

Keywords: Socialism and Marxism, masculine treachery, predicament of woman



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Although women have also played a vital role in the creation of society and have been active agents in the making of the world, the patriarchal thought has always tried to relegate them to margins and obscure their history, in this connection, Gerda Lerner has observed, ‘women had no history-so they were told and so they believed .and because they had no history they had no future alternatives” (Gerda Lerner 222).

Though sex differences do not imply sexual inequality and male dominance in a patriarchal social set-up, masculinity is associated with superiority whereas femininity is linked with inferiority and while masculinity implies strength, action, self-assertion and domination, femininity implies strength, action, self-assertion and domination, femininity implies weakness, passivity, docility, obedience and self- negation. Thus, patriarchy undermines women’s sense of self worth and makes them believe that their inferiority is preordained and they are expected to play a subservient role to men. While commenting on the secondary status assigned to women in society, Virginia wolf points out

I want, therefore, to the shelf where the histories stand and took down one of the latest, Professor Trevelyan’s history of England .once more I looked up women found ,’position of and returned to the pages indicated. ‘Wife-beating ‘,i read ,’ was a recognized right of man , and was practiced without shame by high as well as low. . . similarly, the historian goes on the daughter who refused to marry the gentleman of her parents’ choice was liable to be locked up. Beaten and flung about the room, without any shock of being

inflicted on public opinion. Marriage was not an affair of personal affection, but of family avarice'. (Virginia wolf 51)

Though it would be difficult to make generalized statements like the above, it can be safely argued that women all over the world have been assigned a secondary status . but the advent of socialism and marxism brought about a awareness about the emancipation of women, while marxism fought for social equality , feminism stood for gender equality.

Commonly known as feminism and sometimes as women's liberation movement or womens rights movement, this movement is the result of the principle that women should have economic, political, and social equality with men. Though feminist beliefs have existed throughout history, feminism did not become wide spread in Europe and the United States until the mid 1800s. at that time women were regarded as inferior and less important than men .it was believed that a women's place was in the home, women were barred by the law from voting in elections. Most institutions of higher education and most professional career were closed to women. Despite opposition; feminism grew in power during the 1800s and 1900s and won a number of new rights for women. At first, the feminist movements concentrated on gaining legal equality- especially the right to vote, called suffrage which was granted to women in the united states of America at the turn of the twentieth century, marking the beginning of a series of reforms pertaining to the rights of women, this resulted in a new –found awareness among women all over the world about the right to have an equal status with men in society .This movement gained currency in the west commonly referred to as feminist organizations. Feminist critic Elaine Showalter sums up best what feminism really stands for when she says that "feminism is generally understood as a "movement from the point of view of, by, and for women."(Elaine Showalter 5)

Thanks to the origin of various feminist movements, in the recent past there has been a new awareness about the place of women in society and how they have been portrayed in literary works:

How has woman been depicted in literature? This is a crucial question that needs our attention, since literature reflects the socio-cultural reality, the depiction of woman in literature has been according to the social status enjoyed by women, but the status of women has not been the same at all times and in all societies .Therefore, it is difficult to make generalized statements which would be universally valid .yet by and large women all over the world have always enjoyed a secondary status vis –a-vis men. Hence the images of women in literature have been of the slaves who could be easily sold or bought by men who were their masters. (Iqbal kaur xx1)

In the light of the above statements, it will be appropriate to examine how women have been portrayed in some masterpieces of world literature, particular fiction. A cursory glance of the portrayal of women in many masterpieces of the literatures of the world throws light on the plight of women as perceived by creative artists. Considering the limited scope of the study, only a few prominent works dealing primarily with the predicament of women are taken up for review. To start with the predicament of women are taken up for review .To start with the Indian scenario, particularly Tamil literature, it has been pointed out:

The epic heroines are, of course, the most legendary of Indian women. The figures of Sita (in the Ramayana) and draupadhi (in the Mahabharata) constitute between themselves the whole gamut of experiences women have undergone over millennia in this country. If Sita stands for austere monogamy, absolute chastity piety and patience and above all, wifely obedience, draupadhi is amazingly chaste for all her being married to five brothers. She is subject to humiliation and is the opposite of Sita in being bold, assertive defiant and human. Both have inherited the legacies of the line of pativratas or the chaste women celebrated in our culture. There are also figures from the puranas and classical literature such as Damayanthi, the suffering woman, Sakuntala, the idyllic heroine, Savitry who challenges Yama, the God of Death, to win back her husband's life, Kannaki, the fiercely chaste heroine of the Tamil epic Silappadikaram who burns the whole city of Madurai when the Pandya King violates Raja Dharma and sentences her innocent husband Kovalan to death. There is also in another Tamil epic the figure Manimekalai who embraced Buddhism and led a life of piety and service.

As it is evident from the above observation, women have been glorified, mystified or deified in the ancient classics of Indian literature. This was primarily because literature is closely related to society as it is only a reflection of social reality. It not only reflects but also shapes the complex ways in which men and women organize themselves, their interpersonal relationships and their perception of the socio and all still being treated as second rate human beings or expected to play the role of "angel in the house, the various epitomes of patience and sacrifice. However, since the advent of the struggle for freedom at the turn of the twentieth century which also brought with it the awareness about the emancipation of women, the perception and portrayal of women by creative writers also changed to a large extent.

Coming to the West, a brief survey of the literatures of the Western hemisphere reveals that many works of fiction have appeared with the predicament of women as their central theme. Though it is true that all great novels have their share of interesting and unforgettable women characters, only a few novels have highlighted the pains and pleasures of feminine existence. Though women novelists like Emile Bronte, Jane Austen and George Eliot have achieved this fete quite admirably in their novels, considering the limited scope of the study, the works of fiction that appeared immediately before the turn of the twentieth century coinciding with the advent of feminism or thereafter are study the major thematic concerns of some novels which have women as their protagonists.

Of all the great masters of fiction who have created memorable women characters, Count Leo Tolstoy occupies a unique place. His celebrated novel *Anna Karenina* (1977) is the saga of a young woman torn asunder by her love for a man and the demands of an unforgiving society. *Anna Karenina*, the protagonist of the novel, finds herself in a loveless marriage with a man who is old enough to be her father and bears him son also. When she meets Vronksy, a descendent of a royal needed companionship she had longed for all along. After a great dilemma, she leaves her husband for Vronksy applying for a divorce. But *Karenina's* husband is reluctant to grant the divorce. Tragedy follows because neither of the lovers is strong enough to withstand the steady retaliation of the society. Though a magnificent woman, *Anna* disintegrates and finally commits suicide, making *Anna Karenina* a novel about women who become victims of an indifferent if not hostile society.

Gustav Flaubert, one of the pioneers of the realistic novel, has created an unforgettable woman protagonist in his *Madame Bavory* (1857). Unlike *Anna*, *Emma Bavory* is not a very lovable woman but one to be pitied. A victim of a loveless marriage with a dedicated doctor, *Emma* is lured by the amoral advances of a philanderer, *Rudolph* and is jilted by him eventually. Later she is attracted to *Leon Dupis*, a law apprentice and carries on with him, caught in the whirlwind of her desire to lead a romantic and passionate life. Ultimately she is disillusioned and dies a pauper leaving her husband also in debt, bringing about the disintegration of a noble family. In the character of *Emma Bavory*, Flaubert has presented a microscopic study of the lacerated psyche of a passionate woman who becomes an unsuspecting victim of masculine treachery.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is yet another masterpiece which deals with the travails of a woman in a male-dominated society. Set against the backdrop of a stern puritan society, the novel portrays the trials and tribulations of *Hester Prynne*, a young girl from a decaying house, married to an aged scholar who devotes all his time in pursuit of knowledge, ignoring the sentiments and demands of his young and beautiful wife. Later, by a quirk of fate *Prynne* is shipwrecked and she bears a child out of wedlock which is viewed seriously by the stern puritan society. She is made to undergo a public trial with a child in her arms and is made to wear a scarlet A – a mark of adultery – for the rest of her life. She is ostracized by the society and is made to live away from the town all alone. But with her fortitude and determination, she ekes out a living doing embroidery work and finally becomes a respectable woman in the very society which had once excommunicated her. In the story of *Hester Prynne*, Hawthorne has portrayed the sufferings of a woman who is a victim of the various traditions and taboos of the patriarchal set-up. While commenting on the feminist overtones of the novel, Rod W.Horton points out:

As early as 1850 Nathaniel Hawthorne had shown sympathy for the feminist point of view in asserting at the end of *The Scarlet Letter* that the lot of women in society is hard, and expressing the hope that in some future age men and women would come to understand each other better. (Rod W.Horton 565)

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urberville* is the saga of a woman whose life is rendered by forces beyond her control. Tess falls in love with Alec and they drift apart after the birth and death of a male child. The Poverty-stricken Tess again falls in love with Angel and obeying the gnawing of her conscience writes her past in a letter and sends it to Angel. But as fate would have it, Angel misses the letter and learns of her affair only after their marriage and leaves her in a huff. Rendered miserable by Angel's anger, Tess is tossed between Alec and Angel until her life is doomed in the end. Tess is a classic example of the women who, apart from forces beyond their control, fall a victim of their own impetuous nature in a world which would prefer to treat them as mere playthings instead of living creatures.

By common consent, it was Nora Helmer the protagonist of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) who first gave the clarion for the emancipation of women. Married to a selfish hypocrite, Torvald, who refuses to forgive her for a crime she committed to bail him out of a crisis and black mailed by his employee Krogstad with the document which contains her forgery, Nora tries her level best to prevail upon her husband that whatever has been done has been done only for his welfare. But the adamant Torvald refuses to yield and orders her out of his house but comes forward to accept her when the crisis blows over owing to an unexpected turn of events. But a now resolute Nora leaves her husband and children slamming the door on his face and all forces of oppression. It has been observed more than once that while closing the door on the face of an indifferent husband, Nora was also opening the door for many neglected women like herself in search of identity: "A Doll's House shows the development of a woman, who awakens to her responsibility as an individual and, as a result, throws off the yoke of subjugation imposed on her selfish, egoistical and shallow husband"(Calvin S.brown 155).

Inspired by these great masters directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, many a writer of fiction has written novels with the plight of women as the major theme. While some have portrayed them in a sympathetic light, others have rendered an objective portrayal without attempting to empathize with their protagonists. Nevertheless, the predicament of woman has remained and will continue to remain the favourite theme with the novelists all over the world. While some novelists handle the story of women with only the entertainment aspect in mind, some do so in an attempt to convey a message about the need for the emancipation of women from the shackles of patriarchy. The latter novelists are few and far-between as the issue of women's liberation is predominantly a twentieth century phenomenon which is reflected in the works of fiction written all over the world.

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