

Portrayal of Women in Eighteenth Century English Novels

Sawraj*

Lecturer in English, GGHS-Tokas Patan, Hisar, Haryana, India

Abstract – Men and women together complete the picture of social life. If novel is the mirror of society and if it has to depict social life in its entirety then it is but necessary to talk about both on equal terms. But society has traditionally been male dominated. Man has been hitherto been in forefront in almost in every field including literature. Woman was certainly presented in literary works but only according to male point of view and male perspectives. Female novelists began to emerge on the literary scenario of eighteenth century who tried to set forth their opinions. But it's only Jane Austen who could accomplish this task.

Keywords: Scarcity of Female Authors, Social Indifference, Economic Insecurity, Insensitivity, Marriage or Matrimony, Feminine Consciousness.

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Men and women together complete the picture of social life. If novel is the mirror of society and if it has to depict social life in its entirety then it is but necessary to talk about both on equal terms.

But our society has been a male dominated society. It is only man who has been in the forefront in almost every field. Literature too had been a field hitherto occupied by men or male authors. If we trace the history of English literature we see that from Chaucer to Wordsworth there had been hardly any woman author. This field has been till now thought or considered best suited only to men genius and the picture and condition of women is presented by the men only. As a critic quotes Southey's words "Literature can't be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be.". Some writers even refuse to dole out woman a separate identity.

In words of Tennyson:

"Woman is lesser man, and all thy passions,

Matched with mine,

Are moonlight unto sunlight, and as water

Unto wine."

(Locksley Hall, 1842)

In Eighteenth century literature woman was particularly the butt of ridicule, and she was mocked at by many of the chief writers of the era, such as Addison, Pope, Swift...etc. Fiction too is the product of 18th century.

Chief of the novelists of the era are four male authors who are known as four wheels of the novels: Richardson, Fielding, Smollet, and Sterne. In its predecessors Denial Defoe is more renowned name.

Defoe's last two works (Moll Flander and Roxana) have female protagonists. However, we can say that these two novels with the female protagonists are much ahead of their time in terms of their bold protrusion of the unconventional heroines. His heroines particularly Roxana can be compared to "modern" women in their yearning for independence, their unrestrained attitude to love, and sex, and their insistence on equality with men in choosing their mates.

Richardson has presented women as the projection of virtue. He produced Pamela in 1740 and Clarissa in 1748. It is said that Richardson has presented women with their subtleties and inconsistencies and for the first time in the history of English literature, something was written from the women's point of view. Both novels (Pamela and Clarissa) present picture of the girl struggling against adverse fate.

Pamela presents picture of a young girl in lonely life, subjected to the dishonorable attentions of her employer's son and Clarissa, a girl in better material circumstances, in love with a scapegrace. In both novels, Richardson's aim was undoubtedly moral. The perfect combination of virtue and prudence in the heroine wins her a lover and aristocratic status. But Clarissa lacks the prudence and loses her virtue and that is why undone forever. But there lies a big confusion in his idea of misfortune and guilt. The

victim in both cases is woman; as David Daiches comments "a reformed rake makes a best husband but a girl who once lost her virtue in most minimal technical sense, is undone forever". Therefore, though Richardson has written novels with women as the protagonists, he failed to present opinions of the women. He has painted women according to the prevailing standards of the society.

Fielding produced four novels: *Joseph Andrew*, *Tom Jones*, the foundling, *Jonathan wild*, *Amelia*. As the titles suggest first three novels have their male protagonists and the stories are mainly concerned with their life and adventures. Women are presented as virtuous, beautiful, and innocent like Fanny, Sophia, or Amelia, and scheming and lusty as Lady Booby and lady Bella stone. *Tom Jones* is a lusty passionate and highly sexed young man and Amelia's husband too is an infidel one but they are forgiven by the ladies.

Fielding deliberately rebelled against the propensity to equate morality with sexual control which had long been a feature of puritans and middle class thoughts. Although he resisted against the equation of virtue and outward respectability, he never considered having a single standard in sexual behavior for both man and woman. The various women in *Tom Jones*, guilty of unchaste behavior, are generally treated with sympathy and understanding, but it would be unimaginable for Fielding to have as his heroine, a girl, who was not perfectly chaste and modest. Sentimentality was a fashion and the 'good' prostitute, more sinned against sinning has a long history in the eighteenth and nineteenth century fiction, but as David Daiches says, "it is one thing to be compassionate and understanding about female lapse from chastity and another to make a girl guilty of such a lapse in to a genuine heroine."

Smollett wrote four novels: *Roderick Random*, *Ferdinand Count Fathom*, *The Adventure of Peregrine Pickle*, *Humphrey Clinker*. All are written in a picaresque tradition and as their titles suggest all present heroes through a series of violent brawling, adventures on land and sea. Women are given a very narrow space in his novels. Even the critics do not find them worth discussing.

All of these male writers have painted women in this or that colour according to their imagination, opinions, and social standards. They failed to give and we failed to perceive real picture of the women.

Compton Rickett writes that "sex is not merely a simple matter of physical differentiation, as some imagine it, indeed in its ultimate analysis it is a psychical problem; and it is this fact that lends so great an interest to the contributions made by women to literature."

Bhaskar Roy Barman writes "Woman is not undeveloped man but diverse, her outlook is essentially different from that of a man, and her work,

therefore, is complementary and supplementary to the man's." Somewhat due to the requirement of their historical progress and somewhat because of their psychological individuality, women have with certain reservations, proved literary artists of the secondary order not only as poet, philosopher, historian they have proved on the whole inferior to man, but in art of fiction they can certainly claim equality, they can do so not because they rival man on their own special masculine ground, but because by virtue of their femininity they bring in to prose certain qualities in which they excel, in which men are on the whole deficient.

It is in the eighteenth century that women were beginning to realize their potential for novel writing and with the arrival of women novelists; expectations of getting complete portrayal of women were increased. One of the pioneers was Mrs. Aphra Bhen. In *The Fair Jilt* she painted a modern adventuress, markedly sentimental in type. But she had little idea of putting the woman's point of view.

Among her successors were Mrs. Manley with *New Atlantis* and Mrs. Heywood with *Utopian Memoirs* and gothic writer Mrs. Red Cliff. Then, Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen emerged on the literary scenario of the eighteenth century. Fanny Burney (1752-1840) with *Evelina* set a picture of manners of the time from the women point of view. The heroine *Evelina* herself is not very interesting, her conventionality and shy self-effacement make her a colorless young woman, but some of the uncouth feminine types are brilliantly handled and the picture of the 18th century '**blood**', from the feminine stand point is unquestionably effective.

Maria Edgeworth, though, a prolific writer with astute sense of character and liveliness, disappointed the yearnings of many of her female readers on the point of the portrayal of women and setting forth women's point of view. Susan Ferrier, however, produced before some memorable heroines in her three novels: *Lady Juliana* (in *Marriage*), *Miss. Patt* (in *The Inheritance*), and *Mrs. Fairbrain* (in *Destiny*). But till now the portrayal of women was not complete and compelling. Here and there we got some positive glimpses of women but not satisfactory. It is only in Jane Austen's novels that for the first time female readers got a complete female world, a world where women were painted with their wants, feelings, tensions, and experiences (personal as well as social).

Austen has portrayed women primarily in the context of the manners and values of the existing society (18th century) which has no high opinion about woman and judged her by her matrimonial status. Marriage was considered the ultimate destiny of woman. She has dealt with the issues of marriage, matrimonial planning and affair. Through her novels she lets us perceive that it was a very difficult period for middle class young girls from the point of view of marriage.

Merryn William writes that “practically every one borne in nineteenth century believed that the men were superior sex. Women were considered not only inferior to men, but also very different. The purpose of their lives was marriage, and their proper sphere was home, while men had all the rest of the world to exercise their talents”.

It is said that Lytton, Scott and writers in the first third of the century had distinctly more liberal ideas about women than mid-Victorians like (Ruskin, Dickens, and Patmore). But this does not mean that they seriously challenged the prevailing ideas about the role of sexes - only that they did not make the impossible demands on women. But it is only Austen who touched many sensitive issues of women seriously. A woman with narrow fortune had little scope; she could either be an old maid, dependent on her relatives, or become a governess. Education of women was not given any consideration. They might study at home though in an informal way. Words of Miss Bingley in *Pride and Prejudice* are quite explanatory in this matter:

“A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing and besides all this; she must possess a certain something in air and manner of walking”. (p. 32)

Women were expected to be proficient in singing, playing piano, drawing and formal etiquettes. All such proficiencies were developed to groom them for marriage. And these very assumptions made the women of the time to resort to artifice or to adopt false feminine sensibility. Eighteenth century middle class woman were economically insecure. Even if they married, they could not own property. She had few choices if they were unmarried. She could be a governess, earn a meager livelihood with her needle, or she might trust on her pen. But even here she had to face disparity. Female writers were given little consideration. Austen's own works didn't bear her name. Only her gender was acknowledged. The title page of her novel *Pride and Prejudice* simply states that author is “A Lady”. Female authors were paid very less in comparison to male authors. For *Pride and Prejudice* Austen was paid only £ 110 whereas Walter Scott was offered £1000 for *Marmion*. Austen's total income from her works was about £400 (approx.).

Besides, governing had its own frustrations and afflictions. It was an ill-paid drudgery and a kind of social servility. It was the fear that led Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice* to accept the offer of a silly and stupid man Mr. Collins. Jane Austen calls it as brutality against humanity. In *Emma*, Jane Fairfax compares the hiring of a governess to the slave trade. She arouses the reader's pity on the lot of “four of the nieces of Mrs. Jenkinson”, who were supplied to various families by Lady Catherine. Now the situation

of the women like Charlotte can be understood well, when she says:

“I am not romantic, you know; I never was. I ask only a comfortable home and considering Mr. Collins's character, connections and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state.” (p.107)

In such unfavorable conditions, they found marriage an honorable provision that at least provide them domestic bliss, and social establishment.

Thus, women of her time were leading their lives under much psychological pressures. Austen, as a woman, had a protest in her heart against the rules of marriage market (she decided to stay single) and this amply finds an outlet in the bold assertions of her heroines. Her portrayal of women in all shades contributes to this one single apprehension.

Douglas Bush says, “Jane Austen is obviously not a rebel, but, as an instinctive realist, she depicts her chosen world as it.” Definitely, Jane Austen never speaks about any movement or a revolt against society, a close study of her novels reveal that she was thoughtful about the situation of the women, and knowingly or unknowingly she had provided a platform to the women through her works. She has brought in to English fiction, female tenderness and feminine viewpoint or a kind of feminine consciousness. And it is Jane Austen who fulfilled the cravings of female readers of the eighteenth century by catering not only to their taste but also to their emotional as well as psychological needs.

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Corresponding Author

Sawraj*

Lecturer in English, GGHS-Tokas Patan, Hisar, Haryana, India

E-Mail – vsawraj87@gmail.com