



Images of woman: the question of women's representation in literature

صور المرأة: مسألة تمثيل المرأة في الأدب

Images de la femme: la question de la représentation des femmes dans la littérature

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ملخص

هيمنت مسألة تمثيل المرأة على النقد النسوي منذ نشأته. وقد ساهمت عوامل مختلفة مثل القوالب النمطية والنظام الأبوي وهيمنة المؤلفين الذكور في تشويه صور المرأة في الأدب. وفي هذا السياق، كشف النقد النسوي أن صور النساء التي صنعها المؤلفون الذكور هي كارهة للنساء بشكل ملحوظ ومضلة للرأي العام. وهذا بدوره دفع العديد من رواد الاتجاه النسوي والكتاب النسويون إلى إزالة الغموض حول تمثيل وصورة المرأة في الأدب. يهدف هذا المقال إلى دراسة التمثيلات الاجتماعية والثقافية والجنسية للمرأة في نصوص أدبية مختارة كتبها مؤلفون ومؤلفات. ويخلص المقال إلى أن تحدي تمثيل المرأة في الأدب يتطلب تجنيد كاتبات مستقلات وقارئات مقاومات.

الكلمات الدالة: صورة المرأة؛ النقد النسوي؛ كاتبات مستقلات؛ قارئات مقاومات.

Abstract

The question of women's representation in literature has prevailed feminist criticism from its early outset. The combination of stereotypes, patriarchy and domination of male writers participated in drawing distorted images of women in literature. Feminist criticism revealed that the images of women constructed and portrayed by male writers were remarkably misogynistic and misleading to the public view. This, particularly, has triggered many feminists and women writers to move forward to demystify the female representation and image in literature. The following paper aims to reveal the social, cultural and sexual representations of

women in selected literary texts written by both male and female writers. The paper ends by suggesting that challenging and changing the representation of women in literature needs both autonomous women writers and resistant women readers.

Keywords: women Image; feminist criticism; autonomous women writers; resistant women readers

Résumé

La question de la représentation des femmes a prévalu la critique féministe dès ses débuts. Différents facteurs comme les stéréotypes, le patriarcat et la domination des auteurs masculins ont participé à dessiner des images déformées de la femme dans la littérature. La critique féministe a révélé que les images des femmes construites par les auteurs masculins étaient remarquablement misogynes et trompeuses à l'opinion publique. Cela, a incité de nombreuses féministes et écrivaines pour démystifier la représentation et l'image des femmes dans la littérature. L'article suivant vise à étudier les représentations sociales, culturelles et sexuelles des femmes dans certains textes littéraires écrits par des auteurs masculins et féminins. L'article conclut en suggérant que la remise en cause de la représentation des femmes dans la littérature nécessite l'engagement des écrivaines autonomes et des lectrices résistantes.

Mots-clés: image de la femme; critique féministe; écrivaines autonomes; lectrices résistantes.

Introduction

Representation of woman in literature has been a subject of interest to many research areas, particularly feminist criticism that yielded intriguing insights and theories about it. The position that feminist and women writers took against women's stereotypical and distorted portrayals in literature marked the beginning of an endless battle that prevailed in literary criticism for years. It is important to mention that the literary canon has been dominated for decades by male writers who dictated stereotypical visualizations and depictions of women in their texts. Therefore, patriarchal webs made it impossible for women to be in power, or to write freely about their realities. According to Millett (1970), the exploration of the history of sexual oppression and subjugation of women demonstrated that patriarchy is a social and cultural system that was ineluctably present in every domain particularly works of literature (Millett, 1970, 25).

The early 19th-century women writers adhered to male literary traditions. Their writings, hence, demonstrated strong parallels between 19th-century Victorian societies' perceptions of women, patriarchy, and clichés



proliferated in males' literary texts. The 1970s witnessed noticeable changes in women's lives due to women's liberation movements. Consequently, the women writers decentered themselves from male writers' domination and gained the courage to write about women and analyze works written by women to accurately represent their realities and experiences. This brought significant changes to the literary arena and set new stages for women writers and feminist criticism to challenge male traditions in portraying women in literature.

Accordingly, this article will highlight some of the significant literature on the subject of women's representation written between the 1970s and 2000s to offer a theoretical overview of the representation of women. It also offers a particular interest to the 19th-century Victorian literary depictions of heroines and female characters in selected literary texts, to demonstrate how writers -men and women- were reconstructing and reproducing the archetype of the Victorian woman, and the dichotomy of angel versus evil. The article also gives special attention to feminist theories on women's representation and gender stereotypes to deconstruct images of women in literature.

1. Images of woman in literature

Portrayals of women as subordinate, subservient and powerless with relatively limited roles and rights in life dominated literary texts written by male writers. Historical overviews demonstrated that in patriarchal contexts, women did not have many opportunities in life except for marriage and motherhood. Accordingly, many male writers reflected this by depicting women as dominated, victims, submissive, and passive. Their writings contributed to propagate negative stereotypical images of women; for instance, in many works, Victorian women were deemed to be like angels in the house and to obediently fulfill and satisfy the male's desires. The expression 'angel in the house' was first employed by Patmore Coventry (1854) as a title to his book of poetry that portrayed the archetype of the perfect Victorian woman. In many of his poems, he demonstrated the domination and supremacy of men over women. Also, he marked how a woman should be submissively satisfying her man's needs, and prioritize his desires over hers. He stated:

*"Man must be pleased; but him to please
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf
Of his condoled necessities*



She casts her best, she flings herself" (Patmore, 1854, 53)

According to Patmore, a woman's life and interests must revolve around a man. He employed the modal verb 'must' to illustrate that male lust and pleasure is a duty women must fulfill as they did not have other things to do in life 'but him to please'. He also emphasized that woman's feelings and desires subsided against man's pleasure. In the last verse, he objectified women stating that to please her man, a woman 'casts her best' and 'flings herself', implying that she was solely made to satisfy man. The verses limited and objectify women to mere sexual objects in men's hands with no recognition of their feelings.

Years afterward, Virginia Woolf quoted the same line from Patmore's poem in one of her revolutionary essays "Professions for Women" (1931) to withstand and challenge stereotypical and conventional images of women as angels, passive, powerless, submissive, and pure. During the 19th century, Victorian women were regarded as inferior to men with their lives revolving around marriage, home, and children. The socio-cultural, economic, and political contexts of the Victorian era contributed in shaping the stereotypical perceptions of women's purity, passivity, and submissiveness to men. According to Woolf, the angel in the house was in short immaculate, sinless, obedient, and submissive to males' commands;

"She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily...she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all-I need not say it-she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty-her blushes, her great grace." (Woolf and Bradshaw, 2008, 141)

Denouncing and rejecting the stereotypical representations of women in literature was significantly difficult in early 19th-century Britain. Woolf as a writer had to challenge the written words about women together with the social and cultural Victorian mindsets that propagated images of women as angels. She described those angels as phantoms haunting every book and written page in literature. She metaphorically stated that those angels have to be killed implying that it was high time to stop those distorted representations of women. Additionally, she explained that the stereotypical image of women as inferior to men was partly the outcome of women's overstatement of men's role and presence in their lives. Woolf stated that "Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the



magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.” (Becker, 1996, 238).

Virginia Woolf revealed and uncovered that in societies dominated and controlled by males, female writers would inevitably be insecure to freely express their thoughts let alone their desires and sexuality. She hence suggested emancipating the women writers' minds to express the suppressed feelings and desires of other women. Woolf pointed out the double oppression that women faced as they would be constantly marginalized in patriarchal webs and objectified under male pen.

Accordingly, the work of Austin Jane's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) exposed readers to a variety of female characters who reflected nineteenth-century Victorian women and illustrated the pressure of patriarchy. The novel's opening statement “*it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in a want of a wife.*” (Austin, 1813, p.5); put women in a second position and gave more power and agency to man. The quote presented woman or ‘wife’ as passive and submissive receiver of man's commands and expectations. The word ‘wife’ was positioned at the end of the quote pointing to the low position of women in Britain under male and patriarchal dominance. Austin's opening quotation could be regarded as a criticism of the gender roles dictated and imposed on women in Victorian Britain.

Patriarchal ideologies, male dominance, and cultural contexts enveloping certain societies represented hurdles against women writers. Elaine Showalter in her article entitled “Killing the Angel in the House” (1992), discussed the conditions of women writers and their constant fights against prototypical images of Victorian woman in literature. She exemplified by Virginia Woolf who struggled against two calamities as a woman writer. The first of the women writers' calamities according to Woolf was the conventional representations of Victorian women's respectability and decency known as the Angel in the House, and the second was her discouragement to reveal her sexual desires in her writings because of society. Showalter regarded that the two previously mentioned struggling points were the struggle of every woman as a writer (Showalter, 1992, 207).

Every time Woolf raised her pen to write, she found herself fighting this spirit or phantom of Victorian woman which urged her to “*Be sympathetic, be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure.*” (Showalter, 1992, 208). As this



statement suggests, the women writers had to portray and represent female characters following male expectations and ideals of emblematic women. This requirement turned the writing act for women writers into a guided cycle and a reproduction of angels.

Accordingly, many women writers exposed the realities of Victorian women's lives under the patriarchal norms and clutches. For instance, in *Pride and Prejudice*, marriage was the center of women's interests and a significant life accomplishment for them. Austin depicted the significance of marriage for Victorian women through Mrs. Bennet who vigorously seized every occasion and party to expose her girls and get them engaged. At the end of the novel, three of her five daughters got married and the two others were to follow fulfilling the expectations of the British society on women. The words of Mrs. Bennet when she knew about Mr. Darcy's proposal to Lizzy were, "Dear Lizzy! A house in town! Everything that is charming! Three daughters married! Ten thousand a year!" (Austin, 1813, 292).

Mrs. Bennet's words captured the spirit of the Victorian era, picturing marriage as an achievement that would grant Victorian women status, respectability, and better prospects. The novel also depicted the image of Victorian mothers through the character of Mrs. Bennet whose ultimate goal in life was finding suitable marriages for her daughters. Mrs. Bennet's preoccupation with her daughters' marriage crystalized both social expectations and pressure faced by women in the 19th century. Austin also criticized the Victorian marriages by exposing the superficial relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and showing case that Mrs. Bennet only served as a womb to get children to Mr. Bennet. The husband, Mr. Bennet, avoided his wife and considered her a foolish woman: "*as he spoke, he left the room, fatigued with the raptures of his wife.*" (Austin, 1813,9).

In the Victorian patriarchal context, the marginalizing attitude of Mr. Bennet could be due to Mrs. Bennet's failure to give him a male heir. She hence was failing to fit into the Victorian woman archetype; therefore, her husband's disappointment is revealed through his distance, avoidance and unceasing mockery of her.

The writer, Austin Jane, portrayed the reality of women at an age when women did not have many options and choices in life, and they heavily depended on men in every life aspect. Therefore, it was a truth universally acknowledged, that a woman in Britain must be married to be respected.



The novel could be read as a reflection of the gender stereotypes set in Victorian Britain to which Austin's female characters adhered.

2. The Sexualization and objectification of women

The sexual image of women in literature was another dark point in women's representation, it was remarkably discussed and analyzed in *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millett (1970), one of the prominent works in feminist criticism. This feminist classic was published during the landmark years of second wave feminism. The book pointed out instances of sexualizing woman in literary works by male writers as Norman Mailer, and Henry Miller. Literature was a key location for "*the creation, expression and maintenance of a sexual politics that oppressed women*" (Plain & Sellers, 2007,107).

Sexual politics was an underlying concept in feminist theory coined by Kate Millett to mean power structured relationships through which one group of persons was controlled by another one. Millett explained that certain social groups of the same race, caste, class, and sex have no representation in a number of political structures, their situations were unchanging and their oppression was continuous. Accordingly, many women were living on the margins in male dominated societies.

Throughout history, the system of sexual relationship was based on male dominance and female subordination, thereby making sexual oppression both cultural and political (Millett,1970, p.26). In Henry Miller's work *Sexus*, the differences in representing the male and female main characters demonstrated to the reader the superior intelligence and control embodied in the male character *Val* and the "*moronic complaisance and helpless carnality*" (Millett,1970, p.07) of the female in the character *Ida*. Every passage that discussed their sexual relationship raised him and lowered her to be reduced to a sexual object. Millett described it as "*a dazzling instance of the sexual double standard*". *Val* and *Ida* were partners in the sexual act but she was portrayed in a degrading way whilst *Val*'s sexual actions were glorified and depicted as signs of power (Millett,1970, p.07).

Accordingly, in the literary work *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) by Faber Michel, Victorian woman was portrayed demonstrating the sexual double standards of men. The novel exposed two opposing images of Victorian women. Agnes was the angel in the house and manifested the Victorian archetype woman with her purity, naivety and delicateness, whereas Sugar was demonic, underserving of respect and representing a degraded Victorian woman as she was a prostitute since the age of 13. Both



women were manipulated, and objectified by the male character William Rackham as Agnes was his wife and Sugar his mistress. William viewed Sugar as inferior to him reflecting the social double standards in classifying women in Victorian Britain. During his wife's sickness, William kept his sexual affair with Sugar, and even brought her to his household as a governess to his daughter. After the death of his wife, he was looking for another 'angel in the house' instead of marrying Sugar - his mistress - who stood by his side. The author Faber Michel provided a misogynist representation of women compared to his depiction of William Rackham who was set as powerful, rich, and dominating Victorian man. In one of the passages, the writer described Sugar showing his misogynist view on women's mental abilities:

“A pity, really, that Sugar’s brain was not born into a man’s head, and instead squirms, constricted and crammed, in the dainty skull of a girl. What a contribution she might have made to the British Empire!”
(Faber,2002, p.36)

The writer consideration that Sugar was very clever to be a woman and that her brain was supposed to be inside a man's head was misogynist and derogating to women. He correlated cleverness with men and added that women were not contributing in the country's advance reinforcing the patriarchal domination. This quotation also emphasized Victorian gender roles and the idea of separated spheres as women were made for the domestic sphere and men were for the public one. The marginalization of intellectual women in Victorian Britain was also addressed in Faber's novel, when he stated that the patriarchal society favored women who give birth rather than women who produce ideas and texts. The work illustrated the objectification of the female body as it was regarded as a tool for child birth, also it exposed the marginalization of women's mental and intellectual skills and the subjugation to patriarchal norms:

“Let us close our ears, then, to siren voices offering us a quantity of female intellectual work at the price of a puny ... Healthy serviceable wombs are of more use to the Future than any amount of feminine scribbling.”
(Faber,2002, 171)

The two women – Sugar and Agnes- had distorted portrayals as they were passively adhering to William's desires. Sugar the prostitute was supposed to please the sexual desires of William without objection because of her low status. Agnes, on the other hand, turned lunatic and ended up in asylum because she was incapable of fulfilling the idealistic image of the Victorian



woman or the angel in the house and please her husband's needs. Agnes' education concentrated on how to make her a Victorian lady, "*It's true that from birth she has been groomed to be nothing especially well except appear in public looking beautiful.*" (Faber, 2002, 158).

The character of Agnes confirmed what Gilbert and Gubar stated in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1984) that women in 19th- century Britain were trained to become beautiful object and this caused many of them to loath their own bodies "this desire to be beautiful and "frail" led to tight-lacing and vinegar-drinking." (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984, 54). It hence led to female madness as in the case of Agnes who embodied the struggles Victorian women faced in a patriarchal society that restrict women to limited roles.

3. Towards Autonomous Women Writers and Resistant Readers

3.1 Autonomous Women writers

The creation of feminist literary criticism that would challenge and narrow the stereotypical representation of women in literature was highly required since the 1970's. The French feminist writer H el ene Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976) clearly stated that women writers' imagination was rich and inexhaustible "their stream of phantasm is incredible". They, however, were repressing their inner thoughts due to the control of patriarchal societies in which writing was reserved for the great - men who shaped and defined the representation of women (Cixous et al, 1976, 876). Cixous addressed women writers to break away from the old style of writing to avoid reproducing the phallogocentric representations of women and create new feminine forms. (Cixous et al, 1976).

Therefore, a wave of gynocentric feminist critics emerged demonstrating two different objectives in regards to women's representation. They encouraged women writers to write about women's experiences, and also aimed to develop critical women readers to salvage women's image in literature. Feminist Gynocriticism mainly analyzed books written by women to understand women's culture, history, experiences and ideas. The literary tradition of the 19th century women writers demonstrated the domination of patriarchal system over women's life. For instance, the 19th century women writers were imprisoned in patriarchal poetry and their writings have to conform to patterns set by male writers.

Therefore, the first step into creating a female literary tradition and history was by collecting and reviewing the neglected and forgotten women's



literary works. Additionally, in order to develop an overview of the female literary tradition understanding and analyzing female literary responses to “male literary assertion and coercion” was necessary. Gilbert and Gubar assumed that the literary history consisted of “strong actions and reactions” (1984, xiii), suggesting that in literature women have been represented by male authors and as a reaction the female writers started writing to redefine women from a feminine perspective.

The aim of most gynocritical feminist writers was founding “a female literary tradition which would offer new ways of understanding representations of women.” (Plain & Sellers, 2007, 109). Accordingly, the feminist writer Elaine Showalter in her book *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) revived the forgotten and neglected women writers in British literature. It was a quality work that discussed minor marginalized women's writings in order to introduce a literary tradition made by women in a feminist sphere. The book was a reaction to Stuart Mill's book *The Subjection of Women* (1869) especially passages in which he undermined women's creativity and claimed that male literature was highly advanced and what comes after it - women's writings - were mere imitations of male literary achievement. For Stuart Mill, female literary tradition could never be original and will always be dependent on the male literary tradition:

“... there is a very obvious reason why women's literature is, in its general conception and in its main features, an imitation of men's... If women lived in a different country from men, and had never read any of their writings, they would have had a literature of their own. as it is, they have not created one, because they found a highly advanced literature already created.” (Stuart Mill, 1869, p.187)

Stuart Mill's quotation though negatively undermined women's writings and attributed it to the male legacy, it has proved that female writings have reached a significant level during the 19th century - the age of female novelists in Britain (Showalter, 1977, p.3).

The creation of women's literary tradition was divided into three phases and stages: feminine, feminist and female. The beginning of women's literature was merely an imitation of male literature or in other words an internalizing of the male dominant literary tradition. In the second phase, women's literature moved forward from reaction and protest against the prevailing male writings and representations of women to call for autonomy to write as women about women. The last phase was a turning inward “a phase of self-



discovery that breaks free from both acquiescence to and rebellion from the social norms." (Plain & Sellers, 2007,110).

This self-awareness of women's writing capacities was sustained by different feminist movements that helped women to create a literary tradition of their own. Showalter examined the ways in which the self-awareness of the women writers has changed and developed through the years. Showalter's book - *A Literature of Their Own* (1977)- enriched both women's writings and feminist criticism through its wide range of references of the long-forgotten women writers. The work, however, did not investigate women's writings deeply and was just a collection and a recovery of the neglected and forgotten women's works. It also does not grant big importance to the role of women as readers.

3.2. Resistant readers

The role of women as readers and the creation of critical and resistant women readers were revolutionary ideas in feminist criticism. Judith Fetterley - an American feminist figure- reviewed and re-evaluated women's writings in her book *The Resistant Reader* (1978). The book stood as a manual for women readers who were lost in the masculine wilderness of the American Novel. To Fetterley, "the American canon is largely unreadable for women since so many texts demonstrate man's power over women, while the narrative strategies of these texts oblige the woman reader to identify as male." (Plain & Sellers, 2007,107).

Fetterley presented her readings of male-written American works and revealed that the American literary sphere was dominated by men, thereby leaving no choice for women as readers but to accept male's ideas and images about women:

"...to read the canon of what is currently considered classic American literature is perforce to identify as male. Our literature neither leaves women alone nor allows them to participate. It insists on its universality at the same time that it defines that universality in specifically male terms." (Fetterley,1978, ix).

Accordingly, representations of the female characters in fictional literary works written by males were inaccurate and at odds with actualities and experiences of most women. Therefore, female readers disengaged from reading those unrealistic representations. Fetterley suggested that female readers have to challenge the male writers by not being an assenting reader



who accept every word written by man's pen. They also had to exorcise and purify their minds from phallogocentric ideas implemented by patriarchal institutions. Fetterley proposed a revisionary reading of literature to change literary criticism from closed conversation to an active exchange and dialogue. (Fetterley, 1978, xxiii).

In the same direction, Elaine Showalter pointed out that in feminist criticism, it is crucial to study women as readers and writers. She, particularly, revealed the imbalance in representing the women's writers in the reading lists of books and even college teaching curriculums of female students majoring in English Literature. For instance, in the English Department of women's college, the courses listed 313 male writers and 17 women writers. Showalter illustrated, "*The Norton Anthology* included 169 men and 06 women and *The American Poetry and Prose* listed 86 men and 10 women." (Showalter, 1971, 856).

She added that the male written portrayals of female characters in literary works were limited to images of "martyred mothers, pathetic sisters, and difficult wives; in addition to the myths of female sexuality." (Showalter, 1971, p. 856). Thus, the female students as a reader will encounter all those biased and misogynist representations and ended up suppressing their dissatisfactions. The selection of male books over the ones written by women will teach the female students that "the masculine viewpoint is considered normative, and the feminine viewpoint divergent." (Showalter, 1971, p. 856).

This stressed the marginality of the women writers who stood as recommended but not required. The literary curriculum -as suggested by Showalter- should consider more women writers, images of women in literature, and treatment of feminism in order to create a generation of critical and resistant readers.

Conclusion

The 19th century Victorian time provided a diversity of stereotypical perceptions regarding Victorian women who were limited to the domestic sphere and regarded marriage as their significant achievement. This particularly resulted in a number of stereotypical depictions of women as angels in the house, and mothers that prevailed many literary works. Women writers were not free in their literary writing endeavors since they were trapped in the male writers' literary traditions and the control of the



patriarchal society. Therefore, they were limited to reproducing the distorted and stereotypical images that males and patriarchy dictated.

The rise of feminism and the spread of liberation movement's ideas encouraged women writers to break from the male established literary tradition and move forward to create their own literary traditions. Also, the liberation movements resulted in astute feminist theories that greatly helped in rebalancing the literary arena with more space and autonomy for women as writers and readers. The misogynist representation of women in literature with stances of objectification, and sexualization will be always present in literature. It is, however, the role of the women readers to critically deconstruct literary texts, denounce women's misrepresentations and challenge the traditional gender roles.

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