

What Defines A Woman In Legends And Literature?

Sushreeta Nayak,
Pursuing M.A in English,
F. M. University,
Balasore,Odisha.
&
Manisha Tewary,
Research Scholar,
F. M. University,
Balasore,Odisha.

What differentiates a Woman from a Man? Is it the anatomical-construct of their bodies that lays down the boundary and principles of differentiation between the two? Or do the socially-construct rules and orders of mannerisms that has been dictated, ironically, by men and followed by women since time immemorial, which unveils the apparent distinction between the two groups? What exactly forms the basis of this distinction which has been, rigorously, followed by both males and females of the human society; taught since their wee days of childhood and ‘obeyed and observed’ till their last breath of their existence on earth?

The ‘ideal’ society functions upon a few accumulations of sweeping generalisations, which have been regulated under the cover of ‘rules and regulations’ dictating what is expected from an ‘ideal’ Man and a Woman & which must be strictly adhered to by both genders to uphold the moral fabric of the society. A Man is expected to be dominant- physically and psychologically; that is, being physically active, muscular and strong, rationally and intellectually superior to its counterpart, in short, essentially ‘masculine’. A Woman, on the other hand, must be physically delicate and soft to the touch, pleasing to the eye, sensual yet innocent, timid and must never voice any protestations to whatsoever is required, nay demanded, of her by the male humans of the society; all of which were attributed to the umbrella-term ‘feminine’. These distinct characteristics

have been followed by the generations of civilisations, rigorously and blindly. But, to what extent, are these generalisations upon humankind in the disguise of ‘social norms’ valid and accurate representation of humans? Has not such principles, followed and propagated, by the society, rendered the ‘ideal’ society into a patriarchal world?

These notions of ‘social norms’ has, inevitably, seeped into the realm of Literature. The world of Literature, till recently, had long been dominated by the male writers of the subsequent eras. The female characters, hence, were observed and depicted by the men of the literary establishment in broad strokes of generalities. They were either seen as quintessential virtuous, innocent, sensuous, meek and flawless to a fault; or they were the epitome of evil temptress- the female character who is extremely sensual but possess questionable sense of morality. The former were the projections of the men’s desires, the latter were the legends upon which men’s sweet nightmares were built. The former is the gentler, and weaker, sex; whereas, the latter, is a villain.

These idealised and nightmarish versions of Female were promoted in the myths and mythologies, long before the advent of the genres of Literature we read now. The Male deities were the example of strong, just, benevolent and valiant warrior- Odin and Thor of the Norse mythology, for instance, or the powerful Zeus, the unimaginably strong Hercules. However, the female deities were a different species, as treated in various Mythologies, the ranged from the angelic and virtuous to the maleficent and destroyer of humankind. The ‘pure and proper’ female as established in mythology were the popular Muses of the art, Aceso- the mythological figure personifying the ‘healing process’, so on and so forth. On the flip side, there were several female mythological characters who were considered to be the personification of ,as mentioned above, the ‘Evil Temptress’, popular of whom were Circe, Siren, Nemesis, Helen and numerous other such mythological figures.

It is, therefore, of little doubt that Literature, which draws heavily upon such legendary myths, could ignore the well-laid path of general distinction between male-female dynamic and the dichotomy of female characters. The women were simply an ‘idealised’ version of women,

rather than real-life persona. Say, the poems of Lucy, in the works of William Wordsworth, the character, Lucy, is never given an identity (which is a much speculated upon topic amongst critics and readers, alike) - a recognisable face or true-to-life characteristics. In the poem, 'She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways', she is described as a 'A Maid whom there were none to praise' and 'a violet by a mossy stone' which is 'half-hidden from the eye'. Accurately so, scholar John Mahoney states, Lucy is a "hidden being who seems to lack flaws and is alone in the world"; completely unknown and hence, insignificant in the public arena of the real world.

A similar pattern emerges in the poems of other Romantics, where the female characters were the idealised, and often exotic, characters, not real-life individuals, and in terms of male-ego, as is seen in the poem 'Endymion', penned by John Keats, in the character 'Cynthia'. Or, the evil temptress who brings about the destructions, as is evident in Keats' poem "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", in which a seductress is perceived as a threat to the mankind, thus, must be destroyed by the said patriarchal society.

In the genres of dramas, through the subsequent Ages, the plays mirrors the manners of the era the playwright lived in. In the Shakespeare's play, 'The Taming of the Shrew', the main character, Petruchio resorts to several tactics and mental games to 'tame' his wife, several of which included starving Katherine or depriving her of her much required sleep. These behaviours are today accurately seen as domestic abuse. In the final scene when Katherine has been 'wagered' on bet by Petruchio (as if she were a mere possession, not a living human) to display who has the most 'obedient' wives of all, she lectures other women character in her soliloquy, as to how it is a woman's duty to be submissive and obedient to their husbands in all matters of their home.

This begs the question, are we, women, are nothing but a means to stoke the egos of the males? Are we simply to be subordinate to their husbands, 'tamed' as though we were domestic pet? Are we to sacrifice our own liberty and independent opinions and existence to accommodate the egoistical ambitions of the males?

These clichéd representations of females, thrust upon womankind, are challenged by certain writers throughout the history of Literature, be it through the plays or novels. The play written by William Congreve, 'The Ways of the World', sketches a strong-willed, intelligent, independent yet beautiful and charming female character, Millamant, who knows her mind and is unafraid to speak it. She is aware of her rights as an individual and hence, sets out to strike a few agreements, which will ensure the security of her liberty, before she accepts the marriage proposal of her suitor, Mirabell. She says: "My dear liberty, shall I leave thee? My faithful solitude, my darling contemplation, must I bid you adieu?... My morning, thoughts, agreeable wakings, indolent slumbers, all ye douceurs, ... Adieu -- I can't do it, 'tis more than impossible." She asks to her own right to her waking and sleeping time, to decisions to entertaining her guests or not. She is the example of a woman who is zealously passionate about her rights as a human, post marriage. Relative portrayals of strong, intelligent and capable female characters are evident in the novels penned by several female authors, who strove to highlight the bias and injustices of the patriarchal world. Take for instance, the novels composed by Jane Austen. The titular characters are mainly females in her works, who are as intelligent and witty and competent as their male counterparts, and who voice their views without hesitations. We see the evidence of these features in Elizabeth (Pride and Prejudice), or Marianne Dashwood (Sense and Sensibility). They are just as educated and capable of holding their forts in the battle of wills as the men, while surviving in a male-dominated world. But in portraying such memorable characters, Jane Austen does not shy away from bringing to or notice the gender bias and prejudices of the 18th and 19th centuries. She sketches how a female, no matter how efficient she may be, she was still expected to marry a wealthy bachelor to climb the social ladder. This clever fusion of admirable female characters in the midst of male-dominated society is what made her works timeless literary works.

A woman is simply not just as proficient in the ways of the world as men, but she is equally skillful and is right at home occupying the seat of power & authority. This is the kind of fiercely passionate, self-reliant and powerful character in the drama, 'The Duchess of Malfi' by

John Webster. The Duchess holds a powerful position in her province, the highest, in fact. This admirable character, a widowed mother too, is open about her desires to re-marry, preferably a steward in her court, Antonio Bologna. These are the characters who display the often aspects of women, which are suppressed and oppressed for fear of being reproached and rejected in a world that is dominated by males. One might ask, 'but what is the harm in drawing an ideal and morally superior character? Doesn't it portray the womankind in a positive light?'

In drawing the character of a female in lofty and idealised notions, the writer objectifies woman as a vessel for male's pleasures. This is no more evident than in the poem 'The Angel in the House', composed by the Victorian poet Coventry Patmore, which stated the verses:

"Man must be pleased; but,
Him to please
Is woman's pleasure;"

These compartmentalisation of the roles and value of the existence of females, reduced to the objects of desire of men, is contested by Virginia Woolf in her work 'Professions for Women', where she kills the phantom which she named after the aforementioned poem, 'Angels of the House'. The 'Angel of the House' was the quintessential female as viewed and expected by the society of women- the virtuous, husband-obeying female whose responsibility is limited to the confines of the house she lives in and family she hails from. And, this is the 'phantom'- a woman in gender; is the much prescribed role of the female that hinders them from pursuing their interests in making careers outside the threshold of their homes. In the text, Woolf, metaphorically, kills this phantom- the hindrance between her and her ambition to complete her literary work.

The phantom- given the gender of a woman- represents the dichotomy of a female nature, which was addressed in the work 'Madwoman in the Attic', by Susan Grubar and Sandra Gilbert. Their book discussed the thesis 'Madwoman in the Attic', the basis of which was drawn from the character, Bertha Mason, from the novel 'Jane Eyre' composed by Charlotte Bronte, which

depicted a rebellious, uncontrolled, insane woman caged in the attic of the house of the titular character, Mr. Rochester- her husband. She is the dark contrast to the dazzling illustration of the main character, Jane Eyre; who is portrayed as calm and morally superior to the rest of the persons in the novel. Bertha is even dehumanised to a 'beast' in the descriptions of the following lines:

“What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal.”

But are Jane and Bertha so dramatically contrary to each other, or are they more similar than which meet the eye? Is it necessary that a woman must either be wholly 'good' or entirely 'evil', having only one set of qualities, and not a fraction of the other? Are female characters, pigeonholed into two different categories, separated into two different zones, inhabited in two separate bodies the true depiction of a real-life women?

Gubar and Gilbert, in their work urged the readers to break free of such clichéd re-telling of women, to rise above the patriarchal dichotomy that has been used to categorise the women as either the Angel or the Evil Seductress, asking us to see the women as human who can possess two different aspects, of both good and evil, being equally calm and rebellious when needs be.

Such standardisation of the females was also challenged by several critics through the Ages, from the Virginia Woolf to Gayatri Spivak. They disputed and debated the stereotyping of female characters in Legends and Literature through several phases of what is collectively known as the 'Women' Movement', or as popularly known as 'Feminism'

In the First Wave of this Movement, a group of women comprising of authors, namely, along with Virginia Woolf whose notable works with regards to this movement are 'A Room of One's Own', 'Professions for Women', Olive Schreiner's 'Women and Labour', John Stuart Mill's 'The Subjection of Women', so on and so forth. Notably, almost a century ago, Mary Wollstonecraft had published a book 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women' (1792), which could be regarded as the first of Feministic text, discussed the offensive depiction of female

characters in literary works by important writers, such as Pope, Milton and Rousseau. These critics were more combative in their approach.

The feministic literary theory that we study today, though, is not just a spin-off, but a direct consequence of the Second Wave of Feminism. The book, 'Second Sex', penned by Simone de Beauvoir can be attributed to as the starting point of the Second Wave in the 1960s and 70s. Much of our Feministic Literary Theory is designed by the events of the Second Wave, which brought into focus the three major points of the theory- the role of the theory, the nature of language, and the value of psychoanalysis.

The plight of the women was further expounded upon in the famous essay by Gayatri Spivak, 'Can Subaltern Speak?', 1983, where women, in the light of their inhumane treatment in the male-dominated society, were termed as the 'subaltern'- the 'Other'; who remained 'doubly in the shadows' in the society. They were the 'Other', the oppressed section of the society whose voices of protests were silenced upon, time and again by the dominant males in the society who saw the women demanding for equality as a threat to their self-elevated positions in the world. The essay covered almost three centuries of the subcontinent Asia's history, exposing the brutality meted out to the females of every age living through those periods. This essay fused the theory of Feminism with what came to known as the Subaltern Theory post the publication of this essay.

The 1980s saw another form of Feminism, where the theory became more inclusive, in the sense that other literary theory and approaches were combined with this particular Theory in order to gain a better understanding and explication of the female characters in the literary works. Marxism, Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, linguists, and other theories were included in the Feministic analysis done by the critics.

The definition of Feminism cannot be put into a nutshell of a few phrases, or even sentence sentences. The field of Feminism is broad, complex, and often, contradictory. Feminism is not a demand for superiority, but for the equality of women in the category of

politics, literature, sociality, domestic arenas, amongst others. The work of the Feministic critics is to re-evaluate the literary works, keeping in mind the women's experiences, to correct the gender-bias done in the literary work through the representation of their characters, to unravel the threads of patriarchy and lay bare the manners in which the female section is subjugated, ruthlessly, in this world.

The world, is, still, by and large a male-dominated society. The female authors still have to follow the trend of disguising their names so as to reach a larger portion of readers; the recent example of such tradition was Joanne Rowling of the pop-cult series Harry Potter fame, who, under the pressure from the Producers, had to camouflage her name as J. K. Rowling to brush in the impression that the author was a male. This tradition had been followed for centuries, with some of the authors of the acclaimed literary works publishing under the male pen-name. This behoves the question- had they not changed their names, would their books have been read by as many as it has been, as of now? Isn't the fact that such practises still exist point exposes the treachery and oppression the women have to suffer through, day in and day out, in this society which is, obviously, biased towards a select group of people? These are the aims and works cut out for the Feministic critics, to bridge the gap- the size of the chasm- between the two genders. The world, and the society therein, has long been dominated by a select group since the Age the mankind gained its consciousness about its surroundings. The 'Other' section has been suppressed, oppressed, brutalised- physically and psychologically- by the dominant section. It is time, the flow of the things changed, it is time the 'Other' were seen as equals, as humans. It is time. And, as the quote goes- "No one can stop an idea whose time has come"- Victor Hugo.

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