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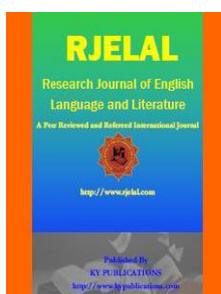


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## THE NINETEENTH CENTURY LITERATURE: COGNIZANCE OF WOMEN'S MARGINALIZATION AND EMERGENCE OF THEIR EMPOWERMENT

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### ABSTRACT

Literature has always dealt, directly or indirectly, with women's suppression and marginalisation but the problematic issues concerning with women's liberation and emancipation became obsessive passion among the writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Marry Wollstonecraft's (1759-1797) *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Leo Tolstoy's (1828-1910) *Anna Karenina* (1873-77), Gustave Flaubert's (1821-1880) *Madam Bovary* (1857), Thomas Hardy's (1840-1928) *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (1883), Elizabeth Barrett Browning's (1806-1861) *Aurora Leigh* (1856), Margaret Fuller's *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), J. S. Mill's *Subjection of Women* (1869) and so many other innumerable works of literature are remarkable for dealing with the predicament of women's marginalised situation in the lop-sided values of patriarchy, and for stimulating them to assert their independent individuality. But those were the dramatic works of the 19<sup>th</sup> century playwrights, particularly those of Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) and G. B. Shaw (1856-1950) that brought about drastic revolution in the society by exposing the gender dichotomy ingrained in traditional social system that has always kept women to a subordinate position. When Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was published in 1879, it made a commotion throughout the world, and the people holding the conservative ideology could not accept Ibsen's innovative notion that a woman has any right to leave her husband and children behind in search of her individual identity. In his plays *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Candida* and *Widower's Houses* Shaw has delineated the women who struggle to emancipate themselves from the traditional gender roles that have kept them confined to the four walls of the household. Shaw's portrayal of his women characters reflect that he wanted women to take an initiative step in every field, domestic or public in order to bring about transformation and revolution in social structure of patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** Nineteenth Century Literature, Women's marginalisation, patriarchy, emancipation.

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The roots of women's suppression and marginalisation have long been embedded in patriarchal social structure. Both men and women have already internalised patriarchal ideology that

proper place of women is within the four walls of her husband's household. The persistence of women's roles as a housewife and mother and their social acceptance estranged women from the normal

social activities. This alienation slowly developed in them the feelings of inadequacy, inferiority and defencelessness. Jenni Calder rightly says that women suffered and felt helpless "because of a terrible negativity, a lack of purpose in their lives, a lack of environment to develop personality." (Calder, Jenni, 136). Both men and women are programmed to think that women are inferior to men and deserve to lead a subordinate life totally dependent on male-folk for their survival. Characteristics of aggressiveness and initiative in men are considered to be positive qualities, indicative of their manliness, power and authority, but women having these qualities are stigmatised as wicked and impious tending to violate the sanctity of womanhood which is aligned with submissiveness and subjugation. Even the eminent ancient philosophers and scholars have undermined any prospective positive role that a woman can play in the furtherance and evolution of human civilisation and culture because they presume that women are innately inferior and mediocre. They have raked their pens in denigrating the woman-folk. Plato "thanks the gods for two blessings: that he had not been born a slave and that he had not been born a woman." (Plato, 168). Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.) takes for granted the assumption that women's inferiority stems from an intrinsic lack in their biological make-up. He thinks that the relationship between man and woman is like that of the ruler and the ruled respectively. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) thinks that women's significance lies only in child-bearing and child-rearing and no other responsibility should be assigned to her. Aquinas says:

. . . It is necessary for women to be made, as the Scripture says, as a helper to man; not, indeed, as a helpmate in other works, as some say, since man can be more efficiently helped by another man in other works; but as a helper in the work of generation . . . (Aquinas, St. T., 99)

Even Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1702-1778), who was the champion of liberty and equality during the French Revolution, considers women's subjugated and marginalised position justifiable in the order of the things in the world. He says:

The mutual duties of the two sexes are not, and cannot be, equally binding on both. Women do wrong to complain of the inequality of man-made laws; this inequality is not of man's making, or at any rate it is not the result of mere prejudice, but of reason. She to whom nature has entrusted the care of the children must hold herself responsible for them to their father. No doubt every breach of faith is wrong, and every faithless husband, who robs his wife of the sole reward of the stern duties of sex, is cruel and unjust; but the faithless wife is worse; she destroys the family and breaks the bond of nature; when she gives her husband children who are not his own, she is false both to him and to them, her crime is not infidelity but treason. To my mind, it is the source of dissension and of crime of every kind. . . . Thus it is not enough that a wife should be faithful, her husband, along with his friends and neighbours, must believe in her fidelity; she must be modest, devoted, retiring; she should have the witness not only of the good conscience, but of a good reputation. (Rousseau, J. J., 117-8)

But the fact that women's marginalised position is not the result of any biological or natural inferiority inherent in them but of gender-bias ideology promulgated by patriarchy came into force by the persistent efforts of so many liberal feminists during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They diagnosed the predicament of women's marginalisation in patriarchal society and helped them emerge from their depraved situation. Marry Wollstonecraft's (1759-1797) *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), proved a mile-stone in women's emancipation by asserting women's rights and independent individuality. According to Wollstonecraft the personality of both men and women is shaped by the social background and contexts in which they live and are brought up. Women are compelled into dilapidation by denying the means to reason and education, and by imposing domestic drudgery upon them. According to Wollstonecraft the quality of modesty traditionally associated with women is equally

appropriate to both men and women. Women's exploitation and marginalisation was reflected in a comprehensive way in the novels produced during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In America Margaret Fuller's *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) contributed much in women's consciousness, their desire for equality and self-expression. Emily Dickenson (1830-1886), an American poetess, was considered as the champion of women's cause. She went into the depth of women's psychology and protested against the gender-based patriarchal system of society. She demonstrated the predicament and the restriction under which the female childhood suffers:

They shut me up in prose  
As when a little girl  
They put me in the closet  
Because they liked me still. (Emily  
Dickenson, 82)

In France Gustave Flaubert's (1821-1880) *Madam Bovary* (1856) reflects the powerlessness of women through the character of Emma Bovary whose aspirations for better and higher life in city are thwarted due to her dependence on men who are vested with financial power without which she is denied access to a higher social stratum, and is confined to the banalities and emptiness of provincial life shackled to a husband and child. Her craving for bigger and better things, however, a sign of women's emancipation, drags her to suicide in desperation. In England Elizabeth Barret Browning's (1806-1861) *Aurora Leigh* (1856), a novel in verse, gave voice to women's emancipation by creating a very strong-willed female protagonist who defies society and its norms to become a poet although her male counterparts assert that women do not have passion, intellectual capacity, or redemptive qualities to be true artists. Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) demonstrates the suffering and humiliation a woman has to endure through the character of Tess who is maltreated and ruined by her father, her employer and her husband to the point where she is driven to commit murder. At last she develops the temerity of stabbing Alec who has been instrumental behind her sufferings, and is, therefore, executed for her crime. Such an audacious action on the part of Tess was not

expected from a woman at that time but it seems that Hardy implied that a woman could contravene her female virtues of submissiveness and subjugation and might go to any extent to retaliate of her victimisation. In defiance of the traditional patriarchal norms and values prevalent in the society concerning the status of men and women J.S. Mill, in his essay *The Subjection of Women* (1869), very strongly and successfully advocates the equality between the sexes. It is generally presumed that there are certain things particularly in private sphere where women are supposed not to perform well but how we can know the real nature of women as they have been deprived of utilising their mental faculties. We must let them try to put into practice their powers. Leo Tolstoy's (1828-1910) *Anna Karenina* (1873-77) also brought into lime light women's marginalisation and suppression in society and helped them develop the courage to raise voice against their persecution and harassment. Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (1883), a very revolutionary and controversial novel, proved a mile stone in women's emancipation and in making them aware of their actual position in the society. Its heroine, Lyndall recognises her marginalised position. She rebels against not what is done to them, but what is made of them.

But the dramatic works of the 19<sup>th</sup> century playwrights gave a fresh and greater force to the movement of women's emancipation. Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), the greatest Norwegian playwright during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is generally acclaimed to be the father of modern realistic drama due to the delineation in his plays of problematic issues regarding women's marginalisation and victimisation. His epoch-making play *A Doll's House* (1879) shocked the conservative world because at the end of the play Nora, the heroine of play, slammed the door against her husband and children in search of self-identity. When her husband reminds her of her sacred duties towards her husband and children, she says:

I have other duties equally sacred. . . My duties towards myself. . . before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are – or at least that I should try to become one. (Ibsen, Henrik, 91).

She flouted the sanctity of patriarchal marriage institution according to which a wife has to face with forbearance all the sufferings and mal-treatment meted out on her by her husband. When the conservative people raised objections against the play, in reply Ibsen wrote *Ghosts* (1881) in which he rendered the devastation of the precious life of Mrs. Alving who, unlike Nora, followed the patriarchal norms and values and stayed back with her lawful but debauch husband in a loveless conjugal knot and consequently suffered throughout her life. Hedda Gabler in *Hedda Gabler*, Ellida Wangel in *The Lady from the Sea*, Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm*, Irene in *When We Dead Awaken* and so many other female characters in his plays brought about a revolution in society, particularly in the lives of female sex. Ibsen's popularity and influence reached throughout the world as he gave forceful momentum in his plays to the problematic issues concerning female predicament.

In England George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) was highly inspired by Ibsen's zeal for women's substantiation and advancement. Taking into consideration the practical and psychological aspects of women's personality he has condemned their dependence on men. *Blanche*, the leading female character in his play *Widower's House* (1892) represents Shaw's matrimonial views. According to her marriage is not an eternal alliance which is to be accepted as such but it is a social contract in which a woman has the right to choose her life partner by her own free will. His play *Mrs. Warren Profession* (1893) incorporates a very enthusiastic and strong female character, Vivie who is considered to be a modern, educated and independent woman. Her life style is totally different from the stereotypes concerning female beauty. She asserts boldly:

I like working and getting paid for it. When I'm tired of working, I like a comfortable chair, a cigar, a little whisky, and a novel with a good detective story in it. (Shaw, 218)

She thinks that we should not blame our circumstances because if the circumstances are unfavourable and adverse to us, we must try to turn them in our favour. She gave a new direction to woman's thoughts. In his well-known play

*Candida* (1894), *Candida*, the heroine of the play, is an embodiment of emancipated woman. Unlike the female characters figuring in romantic literature *Candida* accepts her subordinate position, not due to any fear of social and natural determinism but out of mutual co-operation and a sense of responsibility.

Thus during the 19<sup>th</sup> century there is an efflorescence of a number of literary works in which women's marginalisation and a concomitant emergence of their consciousness towards their emancipation and independent self-identity can be discerned evidently. This wave of women's self-determination and emancipation reached its high-water mark during the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Virginia Woolf's (1882-1941) *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own* (1977), Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), and so many other world-shattering works brought about a drastic transformation in the social structure of patriarchy for the amelioration of women.

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