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THE DYNAMICS OF CULTURE AND GENDER:REFLECTIONS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE
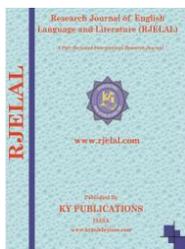
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ABSTRACT

The study of Gender is multidimensional; as it crosses the bounds of history, anthropology, sociology, psychology and organizational development. Gender is known to be socially constructed and is learned through social interactions and influences of people around us. Culture definitely plays a major role in the determination of gender. In order to determine gender identity and gender representation we need to distinguish between "gender" and "sex". Gender derived from the Latin word '*genus*' meaning kind or race refers to the psycho-social aspects that are constructed by culture whereas sex derived from the Latin word '*sexus*' refers to biological aspects of masculinity /femininity . It is relevant that while discussing gender stereotypes one must consider both these terms. From the moment a child is born he or she is assailed with messages of what it means to be 'boy' or 'girl'. Masculinity for male and femininity for female are embedded in their gender (socially constructed) and not in their sex(biological). However the 'culture' as determinant factor varies in respect of female or male behavior.As for instance, women in Saudi Arabian culture are not allowed to drive cars whereas women in the US enjoy the freedom to drive cars. So gender is looked at differently across different cultures and through different time periods. A few literary texts have been examined to reflect a deeper understanding of gender and culture

Key words: **gender, culture, sex, masculinity, femininity.**

Sex and Gender

The study of Gender is multi-dimensional, as it crosses the bounds of history, anthropology, sociology, psychology and organizational development. Gender is known to be socially constructed and is learnt through social interactions and influences of people around us. According to WHO, Genderrefers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men such as norms, roles and relationships between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and is subject to change. Culture definitely plays a major role in the determination of gender. In order to understand gender identity and gender representation, we need to distinguish between 'gender' and 'sex'. Derived from the Latin word '*genus*', Gender refers to the psycho-socio-cultural aspects that are constructed by culture; whereas sex derived from the Latin word '*sexus*' encompasses the biological aspects of masculinity / femininity. While analyzing Gender stereotype it is necessary to consider both these terms.

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From the moment, a child is born he or she begins to be assailed with messages of what it means to be a 'boy' or a 'girl'. Masculinity for male and femininity for female are embedded in their gender (socially constructed) and not in their sex (biological). However, culture as a determinant factor varies in respect of female or male behavior. As for instance, women in the Saudi Arabian Culture are not allowed to move without a veil whereas women in the US enjoy the freedom to wear whatever they desire. So gender is looked at differently across different cultures and different time periods. Gender stereotypes generally associated with men, embody industriousness whereas those associated with women encompasses expressiveness. The traits encouraged for women include being warm, emotional whereas for men it is leadership, assertiveness and independence. The hierarchical power associations between male and female have resulted in gender discrimination, which further culminates toward marginalization and exploitation of women. This distinction between genders is actually constituted by the society; – not necessarily by the writers who presented them, but constructed by the culture they belong to.

Looking Back

Social and cultural discourses of various literary periods have represented women as the oppressed and they have either to confront this through assimilation or subversion. Simon de Beauvoir in *'The Second Sex'* (1949) mentions that woman is a social construct. She addresses women as 'Angels of the House' who remain constrained by the misogynist notions of the society. Kate Millet in *'Sexual Politics'* (1971) uses the term 'politics' referring to power structured relationship where power is vested with the male folk and invariably reinforced through literary texts.

Evolving with different periods the depiction of women in literary texts has witnessed several changes:; from Jane Austen's seemingly demure heroines on to Helen Fielding's mouthy Bridget Jones, a modern day reworking of *'Pride and Prejudice'*. During the Victorian age, women were marginalized and treated as vulnerable and weak compared to their male counter parts. Anne Bronte challenged

this gender system, by providing the readers with a strong female heroine, who blatantly defied laws and norms of the day by leaving her abusive and fearful husband for an independent existence. It was during the Edwardian age that the female started getting out of their homes during wars. According to Anita Nair literature has always been ambivalent in its representation of women. Good women were those who accepted societal norms, be it Elizabeth Bennett of *'Pride and Prejudice'* or Jane in *'Jane Eyre'.*

The American Chapter:

From the perspective of American literature it is observed that the women were mostly confined to their home front. Elizabeth Barret Browning and Kate Chopin are the female writers who raised the feminist issues and women's rights in England and in the United States. Browning was a British Victorian Period artist and during that time females were not expected to show interest in politics, literature and art. They were isolated by men; either husbands or fathers. Yet, Browning, as a female artist, was always interested in the position of women in society and reacted against the standardized social norms. The poet was strongly against slavery and her father's authority. She wrote many poems about social issues, child labour, immortal love, human and women's rights.

The women in majority of the American plays are shown as wives and mothers who do not leave their homes during the course of the play. The major female characters in *Trifles*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *Death of a Salesman*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, and *Fences* are all wives and mothers and they are dominated by the male characters. Linda in *Death of a Salesman* is silenced in her own home by not being allowed to participate in conversations with Willy, and she represents the most silent of all women. Linda's behavior characteristics are in keeping with the traditional image of a passive and dependent woman. She provides comfort to Willy when he is feels low, and as the center of Willy's domestic world, she cooks, cleans, does the laundry, and is the loving mother to his children. . Linda enables Willy to be great, and as Porter (1979) noted, Linda "stays in her place, never questioning out loud her husband's objectives and doing her part to help him achieve

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them" (p. 39).The plays of Tennessee Williams' often depicted the suppressed frustrations of women who remained disillusioned in their lives. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Beneatha's views about women and careers, although verbalized in the dialogue, are viewed as deviant behavior by the other characters, and they often fail to listen to her comments. She is symbolically silenced when Ruth counts her capable of working to meet the house payments.

The term 'feminism' is a global socio-cultural movement that aimed at the freedom of women from male domination in the patriarchal society. This movement was fought for issues related to women like gender discrimination, male domination, oppressive culture, domestic violence, sexual harassment, liberation and empowerment of women. It swept across the world and brought tremendous changes in the status of women. Feminist approach in modern and postmodern literature was first inaugurated with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights for Women* (1792) and it brought revolution in the women's issues as its goal was to establish equal political, economic and social rights and equal opportunities for women.

The Indian Context:

In the context of India If Gender is viewed from the socio-historical perspective, we find that the quick urbanization of the Indian Society has brought immense changes in the contemporary Indian life. Therefore, feminism as a movement in India is not entirely an influence of the West. It has its indigenous roots. "The idea of self does not exist in observation. It is deeply rooted in one's awareness of one's body and is moulded by socio-cultural patterns." [Jasbir Jain]. Indian English fiction writers, especially Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharthi Mukherjee, Githa Hariharan, Kamala Markandaya, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, Mahashweta Devi, Nayantara Sahgal et al. delved deep into the psyche of the female characters and projected various images of women in varied cultural perspectives. The postmodern Indian women writers created a pattern of new study because they dared to shatter the myth of a male dominated social system and laid a firm foundation in the realm of female studies in the Indian

Literature in English. During the period of Indian reformation, the glory of women emerged under the banner of 'New Woman'. The new woman was a reversal not only of the western woman but also different from the common or lower class woman who were considered as vulgar and quarrelsome. In the cultural context, media exercises an important role to play by creating two images of woman – good and bad. Good women are generally depicted as pretty, caring, deferential and focused on family matters. The other image is represented as hard, cold, aggressive – like the witches and mean stepmothers of the Shakespearian plays and Children's literature. The most glaring examples of portrayal of women as 'sex' objects occur in music videos on MTV, greatly influenced by the consumerist culture of the West.

The literary forms have undergone corresponding shifts and have impacted the gender. Sashi Tharoor, Salman Rushdie, Sashi Deshpande, Bharti Mukherjee and Shobha De have beautifully highlighted these changes in their works. Feminism with its thrust on women's concerns, has also brought a major change in the contemporary Indian English. Women writers in particular seem to consciously focus on women's experiences, shifting their positions from the periphery to the centre. Instead of submissive, docile and passive women we find assertive and aggressive women characters. In their effort to find a viable space in the patriarchal society these women explored different aspects of female sexuality and advocated a redefinition of gender roles. In this regard the new aspects of women's experiences in the novels of Manju Kapoor, Kiran Desai, Anita Desai, Bharti Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Shobha De and others. These novelists beautifully depicted the challenges, aspirations and conflicts of the new women. The language used by the characters in such novels includes satire, irony and humor. Most of Desai's works unfold the complexities of modern Indian culture while highlighting the issue of protection of self–identity as individuals. The very concept that woman needs something more than just food, clothes and accommodation is aptly illustrated in Desai's *'Cry the Peacock'.* Deshpande's *'That long Silence'* expresses silence of the women protagonists faced by Jaya. Like

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Desai and Deshpande, Bharti Mukherjee too presented the social status of women as the 'second sex'. In almost all her novels she raised her voice against gender inequality. Spivak in '*Can the Subaltern speak*?' shows his concern for the silenced women of the third world. Thus various images of women as traditional, liberated, immigrant, sensitive, self-sacrificing and emotional are subsumed in the characterization of women. In the recent times the novels such as Chetan Bhagat's *One Night @the call centre* and Shruti Saxena '*Stilletos in The Boardroom'* explore the tension between traditional gender roles particularly those of domestic women and those required by contemporary global workplace that are in conflict with traditional values and practices.

Conclusion

The second decade of the 21st century has opened up profound economic, social and cultural changes; however such change does not signify wholehearted rejection of the old. This has been reflected in these two novels.

From the above analysis, two conclusions can be drawn. First is that the gender division between characters have become sharply marked over the last hundred years. But that difference weakened steadily as we moved forward to the present era. The actions and attributes of characters are now less clearly sorted into gender categories. Gender is thus less insistently marked by the end of the 20th century than it was in 1840s.However till date, the reality is that despite the cultural changes inequality persists in the Indian society. The Dalits, underprivileged and the poor women are still becoming victims and have not fully succeeded to become part of the literary creation.

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