

## **DECODING THE IMAGES AND REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN LITERATURE: A PERSPECTIVE**

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From ‘A Vindication of the Rights of Woman’ to ‘Sexual/Textual Politics’, defining, ‘what is a woman?’, has been the kernel of all endeavours. As it offers a veritable vortex of complexities and challenges, even more unnerving fundamental question is, ‘How to define, what is a woman?’ Numerous attempts have been made to explore what is it being a woman. But as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says in ‘Feminism and Critical Theory’, discussing the intricacy of the process of defining it, ‘I construct my definition as a woman not in terms of a woman’s putative essence but in terms of the words currently in use’, we shall have to scrutinize words in order to reach some sort of definition. But then what better site than literature, for such a scrutiny of words? Hence, reading and re-reading of literature and the way language has been employed to represent and misrepresent women are of paramount significance.

If literature seeks newer interpretations and newer approaches to it, feminist criticism can be of invaluable service. It can throw open the darker recesses of the literary vaults, decentre the centre and lend voice to the marginalized. Before feminist literary theory, we were swimming in the same old mire of antiquated interpretations. We were conditioned to interpret in a particular way that privileged the male position and celebrated the male-dominated world. If it were not for the feminist critics, who was going to, otherwise, look beyond the tragic plight of Othello? We would have kept harping on Othello’s tragic end and how he towers above the rest in the play. We would have been stuck up in our blinkered view of the play, reading not more than or beyond the title of the play.

The drawbacks of the prevalent theories before the rise of feminist criticism are galore. The reading of a text in the absence of a feminist theory of reading was considerably superficial and more sadly, repetitive. But the real loss was that in that kind of a reading, a woman’s experience was lost. The way women are subjected to the position of the ‘other’, and the ‘second sex’ was never brought to light as it was all buried under the debris of the so-called feats of male protagonists. The cultural conditioning of women and the socio-politico-economic discrimination and deprivation were lost in the way men were glorified in the literary works. Hence, interpretation of texts suffered and so many texts awaited a fresh perusal. Until what was on the margin was scrutinized, our reading of the texts remained not only incomplete but also seriously flawed.

The true value of the study of images and representation of women is that only if we take up the task of studying the images and representation of women vigorously, we can hope to explore a new world of interpretations. The analysis of the images of women in literature can expose the inadequacy superficiality of male perception. The literatures of the world abound with mighty trivialized versions of womanhood. Language of literature needs to be re-examined in order to accomplish this. Language was perceived to be a medium, a means of what we wished

to communicate. It was thought to be just a vehicle of our ideas. But it is no longer so. It all begins in the use of language in literature as in life. But in literature, it is subtle and deceptive so even more dangerous. In fact, it is language shapes the reality and our thinking. The language use for women in literature can be subjected to rigorous analysis to reveal how they were objectified in literature. If we study the words like ‘beautiful’ used to describe women, we shall realize that these are images that shape our perception of that character in the text. Interpreting images like this and language like this can lead us to the true, sinister nature of things that reduce women, at best, to sexual objects. The language used to describe a woman’s social position is rife with male bias and male-dominance. The study of images of women scattered across texts is apt to establish the way social forces including language temper with a woman’s identity or the complete, total lack of it. The women portrayed in images of social roles firmly entrench the case of loss of identity of a woman as an individual. Language has done unpardonable mischief with the images of women in literature.

Representation of women in literature has many dimensions to explore. Firstly, literature has, for long, masqueraded as mere reflection of reality. It has been perceived just as a representation of things as they are; hence, no involvement in things as they are. Merely a mirror of life and similar rubbish. Interestingly, the way representation of women takes place in literature is not just a reflection, it is also an illustration of the way perception of women is shaped by the way language is used in it. But if literature has anything to do with the reality around us and if we have the notion that literature reflects the reality around us, and we sincerely wish to reconstruct reality from literature, we shall have to turn to the way literature offers images and representation of women. Is it an option or choice that I am referring to, certainly not. It is neither a choice that we can make nor a fashionable intellectual trend to be followed. If reconstruction of our reality is what is sought, re-examining images and representation of women is a compulsion. It is inescapable. If the world is a play of ‘will to power’, then like charity, the struggle for power, domination and marginalization begins at home. Man-woman encounters in literature are the site for exploration of the subjugation and suppression. If one wishes to unravel the intricacies of the power relations and power structures of the society, there is no better way than reading a text and studying the representation of women. If one seeks to discover how ‘behind every transaction, there is power’, in the endeavour to understand the world, one should revisit the representation of women the hierarchization that texts are fraught with as regards the position of women in society. One who wishes to trace the history of this hierarchization has to, more than any thing, the objectification of women in literature.

To take the power theory forward, it is not just that studying the representation of women can reveal the way women are deprived of any power; it exposes the way women are rendered insignificant and irrelevant to the scheme of things that the basic premises of civilization come under question. If the representation of women is explored further, it will lead us to an astonishing contradiction that on the one hand, a woman is the key component that makes a family but on the other hand, it is the same woman who suffers alienation and non-belongingness in this family, community and society.

When one studies the representation of women closely, s/he realizes that women have not been represented at all. The images and representation of women in literature are a deception, a conspiracy, a mirage and an abuse. In fact, to return to the idea that by studying the images and representation of women, one can come close to defining ‘what is a woman?’, is only half-truth. By examining the images and representation of women, one can also come close to defining, ‘what is NOT a woman?’. And it is high time, that we also define what a woman is ‘not’.

But central to all this is the act of reading. Our reading has to redefine itself in the light of the complexities of examining the images and representation of women. Merely churning out feminist generalization will not serve the purpose. The enormity of the situation also needs to be taken into consideration. What is at stake is not just the images and representation of women. A number of things which we hold sacred are at stake. The whole process of interpretation is at stake. Moreover, reading literature as history will suffer if our reading fails to make sense of the images and representation of women that we come in literature. If we fall short of reading a text well, what we lose is not merely the way women are represented in a text, what we lose is the woman's experience that it has captured. How incomplete would be our understanding of the world without reconstructing a woman's experience! When we trivialize the interpretation of a text as regards the representation of women, it is not injustice to the text alone, it is a failure to fathom the bottomless pit of injustices that a text might provide a glimpse into by the way it represents women. And finally, it is the act of reading itself and its validity which are at stake while we reduce our reading to what is in the center.

Scrutinizing the images and representation of women can be of immense value to the process of interpretation as a whole. This kind of reading has limitless possibilities to offer as regards the way it can impact the interpretation and the history of interpretation. This process of reading texts from the point of view of images and representation of women will revolutionize our interpretations of our texts, including the best works of the world. It will call for a reinterpretation of texts on a large scale. Such a reading of texts is the going to lead us to the rewriting of the literary canon, because when we shall interpret the images and representation of women in the texts of writers whom we idolized once upon a time, would feature in the list of culprits of misrepresentation of women in literature. The literary canon which was monopolized by these writers shall change forever. This reading will also lead us to analyse the way the women are represented in the works of women writers and what images they offer compared to their male-counterparts. This will further lead us to rearrange the canon by giving place to women writers who were not given their due. A re-reading of women writers from the perspective of the representation of women will introduce us to the way women are truly represented as rational, thinking beings. This will further lead us to examine the way writing and reading per se need to be looked at in new light of these insights.

Finally, if there is not even an occasional heartbeat or the flicker of eyelids in the author, and if he is completely and permanently dead, and if reading is freed from the burden of the author, the whole thing comes down to the dialogue between the reader and the text. Therefore, feminist reading, reexamining the images and representation of women in literature, is vitally significant to all that we hold sacred in terms of literature. As Patrocínio P. Schweickart says, 'Reader-response criticism needs feminist criticism. The two have yet to engage each other in a sustained and serious way, but if the promise of the former is to be fulfilled, such an encounter must soon occur'.

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