

COMPOSITION AND PORTRAYING OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THE WORKS OF ENGLISH WRITERS

Priyanka Rathi
Research Scholar
Department of English
Meerut College
Meerut
Email: priyankarathi3@gmail.com

Prof. Awdesh Kumar
Department of English
Meerut College
Meerut

Abstract

This study examines the portrayal of female characters in the works of English writers across different time periods, exploring how these characters have been depicted, their roles, and the evolution of their representation. By analyzing a selection of prominent literary works, this paper aims to shed light on the changing perceptions of women in English literature and the socio-cultural influences that have shaped their portrayal.

Keywords

Societal Attitudes, Cultural Standards, and Literary Tendencies

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Received: 05-01-26

Approved: 09-03-26

Priyanka Rathi
Prof. Awdesh Kumar

*COMPOSITION AND PORTRAYING OF
FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THE WORKS
OF ENGLISH WRITERS*

Article No. 12
RJPSS Oct.-Mar. 2026,
Vol. LI No. 1,
Pg. 088-095

Similarity Check - 01%

Online available at:
[https://anubooks.com/journal-
volume/rjpss-2026-vol-li-no-1-
mar](https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/rjpss-2026-vol-li-no-1-mar)

[https://doi.org/10.31995/
rjpss.2026.v51i01.012](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2026.v51i01.012)

Introduction

The portrayal of female characters in the works of English writers crosses a rich tapestry of representation, reflecting the developing societal attitudes, cultural standards, and literary tendencies across several epochs. Throughout the history of English literature, from its earliest beginnings to the present day, female characters have been an essential component of the narrative fabric, including a wide range of roles, archetypes, and multiple complexity. Through their portrayal, authors have wrestled with issues pertaining to gender, power dynamics, and the expectations of society. As a result, they have provided insights into the lives, difficulties, and aspirations of women. This investigation not only sheds light on the artistic perspective of individual writers, but it also acts as a mirror, reflecting the larger sociocultural environment of the times in which they were written. We start on a trip through history, literature, and the human experience when we investigate the portrayal of female characters in English literature. This allows us to peel back the many layers of femininity, agency, and representation that are present in these works. Early periods of English literature were characterized by the emergence of female characters against the backdrop of medieval society, which was characterized by gender roles that were frequently clearly defined and hierarchical. These female characters in Geoffrey Chaucer's writings, such as the *Canterbury Tales*, embody a spectrum of archetypes, ranging from the virtuous and devout to the clever and worldly. Geoffrey Chaucer is credited with writing the *Canterbury Tales*. Certain characters, like as the Wife of Bath, subvert the conventional expectations of femininity by asserting their independence and agency in a world that is dominated by patriarchy. In a similar vein, we come across women in the *lais* of Marie de France who are able to wield strength, passion, and wit, defying the expectations of society and forging their own paths in life. Within the context of medieval culture, these depictions provide insights into the intricacies of female identity as well as the negotiation of power. The works of William Shakespeare are towering monuments to the portrayal of female characters in English literature. As we move into the Renaissance age, these works continue to maintain their prominence. In plays such as "*Romeo and Juliet*" and "*Macbeth*," Shakespeare depicts a wide variety of women, ranging from the fiercely independent and tragic heroines to the deceitful and manipulative villains. Shakespeare's plays are known for their diversity. In the play, characters such as Juliet and Lady Macbeth question the conventional ideals of womanhood by asserting their agency and fighting the limits that society imposes upon them. Shakespeare presents his audience with the opportunity to ponder the intricacies of the feminine experience and the influence of society expectations on individual identity through the trials and successes of the characters in his plays.

There was a proliferation of novels written during the Victorian era that explored the lives and experiences of women when they were living in English society. Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, and George Eliot are just a few examples of authors who have constructed female characters that are nuanced and captivating. These authors have successfully navigated the limitations and opportunities that are provided to women in a world that is constantly evolving. In the works written by Jane Austen, such as “Pride and Prejudice” and “Emma,” we come across heroines who resist tradition, who challenge the conventions of society, and who pursue personal fulfillment despite the limits of class and gender. In the same vein, in Brontë’s “Jane Eyre” and Eliot’s “Middlemarch,” we find women who are attempting to achieve autonomy, independence, and intellectual fulfillment. They are also struggling with the limitations that patriarchal society imposes on them, all the while expressing their agency and pursuing their goals. A seismic change in literary experimentation and representation occurred during the modernist period. Authors such as Virginia Woolf redefined the bounds of narrative form and perspective throughout this time period. In Woolf’s writings, such as “Mrs. Dalloway” and “To the Lighthouse,” female characters are given the spotlight, and their inner lives and consciousness are investigated with a level of depth and complexity that had not been seen before in English literature. Woolf gives personal portrayals of women who are negotiating the challenges of modernity, wrestling with themes of identity, desire, and self-expression in a world that is fast changing.

Early English Literature

The portrayal of female characters in later eras of English literature is based upon the basic stones that are laid by early English literature. Female characters in English literature were frequently influenced by the prevalent socio-cultural standards, religious beliefs, and literary practices of their time period, beginning with the medieval period and continuing through the Renaissance. Literature throughout the medieval period, which approximately covers from the fifth to the fifteenth century, was profoundly impacted by Christian theology and chivalric ideals. As a result, depictions of women during this time period were complicated and represented both devotion and constraint. One of the most notable examples of this may be found in “The Canterbury Tales,” which was written by Geoffrey Chaucer in the latter part of the 14th century. In this collection of short stories, Chaucer introduces a wide variety of female characters, each of whom exemplifies a particular facet of womanhood in the medieval era. There is a wide spectrum of virtues, vices, and paradoxes that Chaucer’s women embody. From the virtuous and pious Prioress to the earthy and forceful Wife of Bath, Chaucer’s women challenge basic

assumptions and invite readers to ponder the intricacies of feminine identity. Similarly, in the *lais* of Marie de France, a poet who lived in the 12th century, we come across women who defy conventional norms and expectations, exercising power, passion, and agency in a world that is ruled by males. The customary roles that were allocated to women in medieval romance are challenged by characters such as Bisclavret's wife and Lanval's lady love. These characters assert their autonomy and push the bounds of gender and desire. These female characters, by virtue of their acts and experiences, provide glimpses into the intricacies of medieval womanhood. They navigate the limits of patriarchy while simultaneously asserting their agency and wants.

During the Renaissance period, which approximately extends from the 14th to the 17th century, there was a resurgence of classical learning, humanism, and artistic innovation. This resulted in the creation of new chances for the representation of women in literary works. William Shakespeare, whose plays offer a kaleidoscope perspective of female characters across diverse socioeconomic groups, ages, and temperaments, is one of the most famous people of this time period. His plays portray a wide range of female characters. In the play "Romeo and Juliet," for instance, Shakespeare paints a picture of the young ardor and defiance that is personified in the character of Juliet. Juliet rejects the expectations of her family as well as the standards of society in order to pursue love. Similarly, in the play "Macbeth," Lady Macbeth emerges as a multifaceted and captivating figure. Beginning with the medieval romance and continuing through the Renaissance play, early English literature offers a diverse array of depictions of women inside its pages. Women who resist preconceptions, challenge expectations, and assert their agency in a world that is defined by patriarchy, religion, and social hierarchy are among the characters that we come across in the works of authors such as Chaucer, Marie de France, and Shakespeare. By digging into the complexity of feminine identity, desire, and power, these early literary works provide insights into the difficulties and achievements of women throughout history, demonstrating the lasting importance of their stories and experiences. These works were written in the early 20th century.

Modern and Contemporary Literature

The portrayal of female characters in modern and current literature represents a substantial divergence from earlier times in English literature, particularly in terms of how writers have portrayed them. The representation of women in literature changed over time, reflecting altering perspectives toward gender, sexuality, and identity. This change occurred concurrently with the evolution of cultural standards. Authors such as Virginia Woolf were in the forefront of redefining the bounds of

narrative form and perspective during the modernist period, which approximately lasted from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. This period was marked by a seismic change in literary experimentation and representation. In works such as “Mrs. Dalloway” and “To the Lighthouse,” Woolf provides intimate pictures of female characters who are negotiating the difficulties of modernity. These people are wrestling with themes of identity, desire, and self-expression in a society that is fast changing. Woolf investigates the inner lives of her female protagonists with a depth and complexity that has never been seen before in English literature. She does this by using stream-of-consciousness narrative and interior monologue. This allows her to shed light on the complexities of female experience and consciousness.

In a similar vein, the poetry of the modernist age, which is epitomized by the works of poets such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, provides glimpses into the minds of women who are struggling to cope with the dislocations and alienations that come with contemporary living. Women emerge as figures of longing, anguish, and fragmentation in poems such as Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” with their voices resonating amidst the remains of a world that has been shattered. The existential agony and spiritual malaise of the modern state are captured by Eliot through the use of symbols, allusions, and fragmented imagery. He offers disturbing images of female characters who are adrift in a world that is devoid of meaning and connection. The portrayal of female characters in modern literature is always evolving, which is a reflection of the continual difficulties and victories that women face in the twenty-first century. Authors such as Margaret Atwood, Zadie Smith, and J.K. Rowling provide a wide range of representations of women that are rich and diverse. These authors explore topics such as identity, agency, and resilience via a variety of narrative techniques and genres. In Atwood’s dystopian novel “The Handmaid’s Tale,” for instance, female protagonists encounter the horrors of a totalitarian society, affirming their humanity and rejecting persecution in the face of adversity. This is an illustration of their ability to stand up for themselves. Atwood provides a terrifying critique of patriarchal power structures and the degradation of women’s rights through the character of Offred and other characters in her novel. She invites readers to consider the consequences of complacency and indifference in the face of tyranny.

From the introspective narratives of Virginia Woolf to the dystopian visions of Margaret Atwood, modern and current literature offers a rich and varied tapestry of female representation. This can be seen even in the most recent works of literature. The authors, through their works, investigate the complexity of feminine identity, desire, and power, and they invite readers to examine the trials and accomplishments of women in a world that is fast changing. When we delve into the lives, goals, and

struggles of female characters, we are able to acquire insights into the continuing endurance, fortitude, and humanity of women throughout history. This sheds light on the ongoing quest for equality, justice, and freedom in the creation of a society that is more just and equitable.

Socio-Cultural Influences Top of Form

When it comes to the depiction of female characters in the works of English writers throughout history, socio-cultural forces play a significant part in defining the portrayal of these characters. Throughout history, from the medieval period to the present day, the depiction of women in literature has been profoundly influenced by societal conventions, gender roles, and cultural expectations. This is a reflection of broader attitudes towards gender, power relations, and social hierarchies. Literature throughout the medieval period, which approximately lasted from the fifth to the fifteenth century, was profoundly impacted by Christian theology, feudalism, and chivalric ideals. As a consequence, depictions of women during this time period were often complicated and conflicting. However, women also occupied a liminal zone within society, where their roles were frequently determined by the needs of family, marriage, and reproduction. Although it was expected of them to embody qualities such as piety, chastity, and obedience, women were also supposed to be subject to these expectations. In works of literature such as “The Canterbury Tales” by Geoffrey Chaucer and the *lais* of Marie de France, we witness women navigating the limits of patriarchy while asserting their agency and aspirations, so rejecting the established gender roles and expectations that have been placed on them.

Industrialization, urbanization, and the emergence of the middle class all made significant contributions to the transformation of British society during the Victorian era, which approximately lasted from the 19th century to the early 20th century. During this time period, there was a contradictory mix of social progress and cultural conservatism. Female characters in literature were frequently romanticized or vilified, which reflected fears about the shifting roles that women play in society as well as the instability of established gender standards through the medium of literature. In the books of authors such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot, we see women who resist traditional norms and assert their agency in the face of patriarchal oppression. Characters in these works navigate the intricacies of love, marriage, and social status, giving critiques of gender discrimination and the limits of Victorian femininity. These characters range from the vivacious heroines of Austen’s romantic comedies to the fiercely independent protagonists of Brontë’s gothic novels.

In the modern and contemporary eras, socio-cultural forces continue to alter the portrayal of female characters in English literature. This is because authors are

grappling with themes of identity, sexuality, and power in a society that is becoming increasingly varied and globalized. In the works of modernist authors like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, female characters are frequently portrayed as rich and diverse beings. Their inner lives and consciousness are examined with a level of depth and delicacy that has not been seen in literature before. From the suffocating traditions of Edwardian England to the fragmented realities of post-World War I Europe, Woolf and Joyce give intimate portrayals of women who are struggling to come to terms with the problems of modernity. These portraits are conveyed through the use of stream-of-consciousness narration and interior monologue.

Margaret Atwood, Zadie Smith, and J.K. Rowling are just a few examples of current authors who continue to investigate the intricacies of female identity and agency. In their works, these authors cover topics such as feminism, race, and intersectionality. Atwood's dystopian novel "The Handmaid's Tale," for instance, features female protagonists who are forced to confront the horrors of a totalitarian state. These characters fight against oppression and reclaim their autonomy in the face of institutionalized misogyny. Similar to how we come across women who defy stereotypes and challenge expectations in Rowling's magical world of Hogwarts and in Smith's multicultural storylines, we come across women who forge their own paths and shape their own destinies in a world that frequently wants to limit and contain them.

The portrayal of female characters in the works of English writers throughout history has been significantly influenced by socio-cultural factors. This has been the case throughout the whole of English literary history. Women have been portrayed as complicated, diverse persons from the medieval period up till the present day. Their identities and experiences are influenced by the socio-cultural situations in which they live. This depiction of women has persisted until the twentieth century. The exploration of the difficulties and achievements of female characters in literature provides us with insights into the persistent endurance, courage, and humanity of women throughout history. These insights shed light on the continual drive for equality, justice, and freedom in the creation of a society that is more just and equitable.

Conclusion

The way in which female characters are portrayed in the works of English authors acts as a mirror, reflecting the ever-changing sociocultural context of the times in which they were written. Women in literature have been portrayed with a complexity that reflects shifting attitudes toward gender, power dynamics, and cultural expectations. This complexity may be traced back to the medieval period and continues into the modern age. Characters that were female throughout the early eras of English literature were able to manage the limits of patriarchal society while simultaneously asserting

their agency and wants, thereby rejecting the established gender norms and expectations that were prevalent at the time. Women continued to assert their individuality and challenge society conventions throughout the progression of literature during the Renaissance and Victorian eras. They did this by offering critiques of gender inequity and the limits that come with being a woman. During the modern and contemporary periods, female characters evolved as individuals who were complicated and multifaceted, struggling with the challenges of modernity and creating their own paths in a world that was rapidly changing. Through their tribulations and victories, these individuals encourage readers to reflect on the complexity of feminine identity, agency, and resiliency. They also shed light on the ongoing pursuit of equality, justice, and freedom in the interest of creating a society that is more just and equitable. We gain insights into the rich tapestry of feminine experience and the ongoing power of women's voices to inspire, question, and affect the world around them as we reflect on the portrayal of female characters in English literature. This is because writing is a kind of literary expression that is written in English.

References

1. Akhter, Tawhida & Batta, Ajoy. (2017). International Journal For Innovative Research in Multidisciplinary Field A Psychological Perspective of Female Characters in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* and Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*.
2. Bryndová, Lucie. (2016). Female Characters in Angela Carter's Works in the Context of Postmodern Feminism.
3. Chatraporn, Surapeepan. (2006). The Defiance of Patriarchy and the Creation of a Female Literary Tradition in Contemporary World Popular Fiction. *MANUSYA*. 9. 35-53. 10.1163/26659077-00903002.
4. Hamdan, Samir Mohamad. (2010). English Language Textbooks Reflect Gender Bias: A Case study in Jordan. .. *Advances in Gender and Education*, Issue No,2, October, 2010.
5. Kielkowicz, Justyna. (2017). Beyond the Convention? Representation of Female Characters in Middle English Romances. *New Horizons in English Studies*. 2. 39. 10.17951/nh.2017.2.39.
6. Nawale, Arvind. (2012). "Feminine Fragrance: Reflections on Women's Writing in English."
7. Nawale, Arvind. (2013). "Portrayal of Women in Media and Literature".
8. Nofal, Mohammed & Qawar, Hanadi. (2015). Gender Representation in English Language Textbooks: Action Pack 10. *American Journal of Educational Research*. 1. 14-18.