



Research Paper

## Reimagining Gender and identity in Literary Classics.

Hijiet rafiq

### Abstract

*This study takes a diversified approach incorporating literary analysis, feminist theory, and cultural studies in order to explore gender representation in literature. Current viewpoints from books like "The Madwoman in the Attic" is examined along with ancient literature like "paradise lost" in it. The marginalization of female characters in patriarchal tales is emphasized in this study. Ultimately, this dissertation enhances discussions on gender, power and identity in literature, persuading a re-evaluation of cultural narratives surrounding gender.*

**Keywords:** Gender, literature, power dynamics, stereotypes, in-depth analysis.

*Received 08 Sep., 2025; Revised 17 Sep., 2025; Accepted 19 Sep., 2025 © The author(s) 2025.*

*Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)*

### I. Introduction

While talking about the events concerning men and women it is important to evaluate the terms "gender" and "sex". The term gender comprises of a person's socially constructed roles, actions, expressions and identities such as norms, relationships, and self-representation as male or female whereas, biological factors such as chromosomes, hormones and reproductive organs form the concept of sex. The outcome of nurture is gender while the outcome of nature is sex. People often don't understand that gender is the result of social structure. So Social Role Theory says that to affirm the gender stereotypes disposed on men and women they have to act diversely. As Beauvoir says "One is not born, rather becomes, woman," the behaviour of people in the socially assembled power structure is what defines gender. Women are only domesticated for subordination over these years and traditional-male-constructed gender norms are used to discipline women in the hierarchal web. The traditional works of literature teach women to be attentive and submissive so tounintentionally follow the plots and absorb the feminine traits and behaviours explained by the writer. There are some texts like "Literary Women" by Ellen Moers and "The Madwoman in the Attic" by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar which provide the structure and critical insight for understanding how concepts of gender roles and Conflicts are described in literature. Published in 1977 Ellen Moers' remarkable work "literary women" talks about the submissive and one-dimensional roles that limit women's autonomy. It places emphases on women in literature through different archetypes such as the Angel in the house and the Monster. Moers displays how various authors like Virginia woolf, Charlotte Bronte and Mary Shelley have tussled with and bought down these archetypes by showing different pictures of femininity that go against traditional gender norms. Similarly, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar published "The Madwoman in the Attic" in 1979 which inquires the traditional ways of portraying women in literature as vilified and pathologized. In orthodox works of literature, according to Gilbert and Gubar the female characters lack the sophistication and subjectivity often demonstrated as either Angels or monsters. This ancient narrative where the Madwoman was concealed and suppressed by the patriarchal society was dusted by a lot of famous authors like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Emily Bronte, Jane Austen, Gilbert and Gubar. As we delve into this exploration we observe how gender not only shape the depiction of characters but also affect the themes, plots, narratives of the literary texts playing a central organizing principle in literature. The representation of female characters is always controlled by the male authors and they are the ones who speak for the terms of their existence. Despite advancements in gender studies, literature frequently reinforces archaic gender conventions and stereotypes. The objective of this analysis is to close the knowledge gap of understanding how literary works—both historical and contemporary—construct and challenge gender roles. By examining these portrayals, the research seeks to uncover the impact of gender representation on societal perceptions and highlight the need for more inclusive and diverse narratives. It also shows the continuous struggle for gender equality and representation, the converging gender with sexuality, the perpetual quest of social and cultural issues and the construction of masculinity and femininity.

## **II. Methodology**

A qualitative research design was employed in this study which is grounded in feminist literary criticism to find out how female characters are featured in canonical literary works authored by men. The objective is to analyse how these portrayals have historically reinforced patriarchal norms, particularly through the recurring archetypes of the “angel” and the “monster”. Diverse range of literary classics spanning from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were utilized. Primary data were collected through close readings of the selected literary texts, focussing on narrative structure, character development and thematic content related to gender roles. Secondary data were gathered from scholarly articles, critical essays and existing feminist literary criticism framework. This method permits a critical investigation of the ways in which male authors have historically constructed female identities in literature, contributing to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes.

## **III. Discussion**

While exploring gender representation in literature one gets to know how societal norms are both reflected and perpetuated in literature. Through the analysis of modern reassessment of female characters alongside with seminal texts like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s “The Madwoman in the Attic”, John Milton’s “Paradise Lost” and Ellen Moers’ “Literary Women”, we unveil the complex ways in which literature engages with gender norms and dynamics. In understanding the historical marginalization of female characters in literature Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s “The Madwoman in the Attic” plays a significant role.

An archetype “Angel in the house” is introduced by the author who symbolizes the ideas of femininity in Victorian era. This character represents traits that were idealized and supported by the patriarchal society of that time like passivity, self-sacrifice and domesticity. “The angel in the house” represents women who are expected to confine themselves to their private sphere, prioritizing family and domestic roles above personal ambition or innovative expression. The angelic ideal is explained by Gilbert and Gubar as one who has no story of her own but is rather created, gives comfort to others’ does not seek her own fulfilment but is fulfilled by the lives of her male relatives. (Gilbert and Gubar 20)

In contrast “The madwoman in the attic” symbolizes the woman who defies these constraints and does not suppress desires rather is rebellious. These characters are often showed as ‘mad’ or ‘eccentric’ just like Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë’s “Jane Eyre”. The captivity of Bertha in the attic serves as a metaphor for the societal repression of women who challenge patriarchal norms. Her madness is represented as a consequence of severe restrictions placed on women, emphasizing the profound impact of gender norms on the emotional and mental state of women. As Gilbert and Gubar argue, “the madwoman’s imprisonment...suggests the ultimate punishment for a woman who seeks to escape the prescriptions of femininity—madness, exile, and a forced return to silence”. (Gilbert and Gubar 83). By juxtaposing the angel with madwomen, Gilbert and Gubar display the portrayal of gender in writing, implementing binary logic. So, whether a woman receives praise or is criticized depends on her adherence to established gender norms.

The author explores the struggle of female characters who resist societal expectations and also highlights the ways in which literature perpetuates and challenges the dominant gender ideologies. The author contends that “to be selfless is not only to be noble but to be dead, a sacrifice, as much to oneself as to patriarchal culture” (Gilbert and Gubar 28). The dual role of literature where it both mirrors and interrogates the prevailing gender norms is displayed in their analysis.

Historical perspective on gender roles reflecting the attitudes of 17<sup>th</sup> century England is provided in John Milton’s “Paradise Lost”. In essence, this epic poem examines the concepts of power, authority and rebellion. It also explores in great detail the patriarchal aspects of 1600s culture. The portrayal of Adam and Eve by Milton explains the gender hierarchy widespread during this period. The subordinate companion is presented as Eve while the dominant figure is depicted as Adam. Eve is found within the boundaries of passivity and submission, which uphold conventional gender norms. Milton describes Adam as “for contemplation hee and valor form’d / For softness shee and sweet attractive Grace” (Book 4, lines 297-298), emphasizing the hierarchical distinction between the two and assigning Eve a more passive role. However a divisive element is added to this hierarchy when Eve decides to eat the forbidden fruit. Her pursuit of knowledge and independence challenges the status quo, illustrating the difficulties of female agency within a patriarchal framework. Eve’s curiosity and desire for wisdom are revealed when she says, “for inferior who is free?” (Book 9, line 825), challenging the idea that her lesser status should preclude her from knowledge and self-determination.

While Adam expresses his happiness over having a companion but he also belittles Eve by showing her inferior to him in many aspects. He believes that she is less similar to the creator thus does not fully represent the dominion that has been bestowed upon them. (Book 8 Paradise lost). Though he admires Eve’s beauty and charm and also believes that her choices are morally decent and smart yet talks about Eve being inferior to him in intelligence and physical characteristics. So, the complex notions of gender are explored through the character of Eve particularly the feminine gender as she is subjected to admiration and criticism at the same time. The representation of Eve by Milton is a study in contrast. While it is significant that she desired

for knowledge, but that curiosity actually lead to humanity's fall as portrayed by Milton reflecting the conflict towards female autonomy in that age. Milton explains Eve's act as a misdeed, but he notes her desire "to know what might be known", emphasizing the inherent conflict in her pursuit (Book 9 page 773). Further the gender dynamics gets complicated when Milton portrays Satan's rebellion, suggesting that characteristics associated with masculinity, such as ambition, can have both positive and negative outcomes. A nuanced examination of gender roles and their impact on female lives is provided by this duality. Milton describes Satan's ambition and defiance as "of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste / Brought death into the World, and all our woe" (Book 1, lines 1-2), attributing his fall to traits often associated with masculinity, such as ambition and defiance.

This discussion is further extended in Ellen Moers' "Literary Women" by exploring the representation of women in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century literature. The exclusion of female characters due to the patriarchal and societal norms is highlighted by Moers. Restrictive gender roles prevalent in this literature like "The angel in the house", idealizes women as virtuous and self-sacrificing while the women who deny these norms and challenge societal expectations are represented as 'monsters'. They face criticism and societal backlash. As Moers writes, "The angel is, in a sense, a prison, her boundaries defined by the needs of others rather than her own desires" (Moers 15), describing how the archetype limits women within a narrow scope of socially acceptable behaviour. Back in those days women of high intellect and wisdom were considered witches who created magical spells and were burnt alive. These women were believed to be a threat to patriarchal hierarchy as they challenged the gender norms. Moers explains how these restraints are also tracked by female authors like Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters. Strong willed female leads are shown in Austen's novels, such as "Pride and Prejudice" who challenge social norms and claim their independence. In the same way female protagonists who tackle and withstand social limitations are presented in the works of Bronte sisters. These author's narratives expand the discourse on gender and contribute significantly to feministic literature.

The traditional gender expectations of that time are reflected by Milton's portrayal of female characters in "Paradise Lost". Eve is presented as a figure of curiosity and agency when she chose to eat the forbidden fruit but her submissiveness and beauty aligns with conventional norms. On the other side characters like sin, incorporates the dangers of femininity, further displaying the negative stereotypes attached to a woman in that period. Diverse opinions on gender representation are offered by modern readings of Eve like in Jeanette Winterson's "The Passion" Eve symbolizes as an independent figure in historical fiction. Jeanette questions female passivity and Eve's courage. Anne Sexton's poem "Eve" also provides insight about selfhood and independence drawing Eve as a multidimensional character. Sexton describes Eve as "living in her / red muscle, the heart / as it has always been" (Sexton 23), highlighting her inherent power and independence as a person with free will and a sense of self. Nail Gaiman's "Sandman: Preludes & Nocturnes" reframes Eve as a representation of power and balance, questioning conventional notions of womanhood.

New views into gender and identity are presented by these modern interpretations, pushing to reconsideration of old narratives. They emphasize the changing landscape of gender representation in literature and highlight the necessity of continually questioning and broadening our comprehension of gender. Examining literary representation and gender norms reveals how social beliefs have a big impact on how female characters are portrayed. By exploring both historical and contemporary representations, we enhance our understanding of how literature mirrors and critiques gender dynamics. While contemporary interpretations offer fresh perspectives on gender and identity, classic works like "The Madwomen in the Attic", "Paradise Lost" and "Literary Women" provide essential frameworks for tackling the issues. One can observe how social ideas significantly influence how female characters are portrayed by looking at literary representation and gender norms. When taken as a whole, these conversations enhance our understanding of how literature both shapes and challenges social norms.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The intellectual insight into the interplay between literature and gender is analysed in these literary works like "Paradise Lost", "Literary Women" and "The Madwoman in the Attic". Through characters like Eve and Sin, the societal expectations of femininity and patriarchal norms are explored through gender roles in John Milton's "Paradise Lost". Displaying the tug between traditional gender roles and the quest for personal agency John Milton portrayed Eve as both obedient and independent. He also showcases Eve's curiosity for eating the forbidden fruit which served as a challenge to authority and questioned established norms. The marginalisation of women in literature, displaying how traditional norms often side lined female perspective in favour of male-centric ideas is further illustrated in Ellen Moers' "Literary Women". The suppression of woman's voices is further analysed by Ellen Moers, while also celebrating the potency of female authors who denied these restrictions to tell their own stories. Historical context of gender representation and the ongoing challenges and stereotypes faced by women can be found in her work. A feminine critic of Madwoman trope can be seen in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's "The Madwoman in the attic", demonstrating how the label of madwoman has been used over the period to sideline and silence women.

Their examination of the Madwoman as a representation of oppression and resistance sheds light on broader societal concerns about gender, power and individual liberty. Readers are brought about by this approach to reevaluate how women are portrayed in literature and the implications of these representations for gender equality. Considered together, these pieces offer a range of perspectives on literary representation and gender relations. They provide important insights into the ways literature mirrors and influences societal perceptions of gender, power, and identity. Readers are encouraged to investigate the power dynamics present in literary narratives and their importance for justice and gender equality by exploring these basic classics. Understanding the evolution of gender roles and the continuous discussion of gender in literature requires these approaches.

### **Works cited**

- [1]. Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press, 2020.
- [2]. Graham, Elspeth. "'Vain Desire,' 'Perverseness' and 'Love's Proper Hue': Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Interest in *Paradise Lost*." *Critical Survey*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1992, pp. 133–39.
- [3]. Lehnhof, Kent R. "Performing Masculinity in *Paradise Lost*." *Milton Studies*, vol. 50, 2009, pp. 64–77.
- [4]. McGrath, Patrick J. "Formal Resistance: Gender Hierarchy and Eve's Final Speech in *Paradise Lost*." *Milton Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2013, pp. 72–87.
- [5]. Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Edited by William Kerrigan, John P. Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon, Random House, 2007.
- [6]. Zimmerman, Shari A. "Milton's 'Paradise Lost': Eve's Struggle for Identity." *American Imago*, vol. 38, no. 3, 1981, pp. 247.
- [7]. Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Edited by Gordon Teskey, W.W. Norton & Company, 2005.
- [8]. Sexton, Anne. "Eve." *The Complete Poems*, Houghton Mifflin, 1981.
- [9]. Moers, Ellen. *Literary Women: The Great Writers*. Oxford UP, 1976.
- [10]. Moers, Ellen. *Literary Women*. Doubleday, 1976.