

# Gender Inequality and Literature: A Contemporary Issue

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## ABSTRACT

Literature asserted itself to be an intellectual imitator to life for generations in this earth that has voiced the voiceless. The recent modern and postmodern literary ideas have changed the whole scenario of the literature. One of the contemporary issues is the gender inequality. Writers across the globe wrote about every burning issue of their times. One among such issues is gender inequality. Some of the writers had suffered with this menace of the society themselves and have lightened this menace very keenly and acutely in their works. This gender inequality was a result of illusions both in the family and society about its members. These writers remained an active reformist to bring a social change in the society. Throughout their journey they worked for this deprived classes of the society. This research paper attempts to bring out all the elements of gender inequality, the agony and the pain suffered by these members around the globe through the lenses of fiction.

**Keywords:** *Gender inequality, injustice, deprivation, agony, pain, and breakdown.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Most of the societies are male-dominated where a woman is only supposed to be a mother, an ideal wife and a home-maker with multifarious roles attributed to her in the family. As a wife and mother, her service of sacrifice, tolerance and submissiveness are her required attributes. Furthermore, her admired qualities of adjustments make her life faithful and obedient. But this individual self of a woman has very little recognition in the patriarchal society and it leads to her self-effacement. Women form an inseparable part of human race which not only acts in the vital process of nurturing the future generations of humanity but also play very important roles in every walk of life. In spite of playing very significant roles within as well as outside their homes, they are always regarded as “the weaker sex” who is inferior to their male counterparts. In every part of the world, women at times face a common problem that is of gender discrimination. No matter what their culture or background will be, they all are commonly referred to as “weak” and secondary to their male counterparts. In this dissertation, the researcher will make sincere efforts to explore this pain of gender discrimination which is suffered by women across the globe. In numerous cases, a woman, no matter of what race, religion or region she is, but she has to suffer the same pain of being discriminated.

In most of the settled societies women in all classes have experienced very low status, oppression and lead towards their exploitation. Women have been enslaved by men in every class and in every society. Woman in the whole world like in Asia, Europe or the Middle East is unable to have any influence over the political, religious or cultural lives of her society. She neither owns any property nor inherits it, but she herself is treated as a property. In ancient times, if a man rapes a woman, the punishment was given to his wife by handing her to over to the rapist’s husband. In ancient Greece, women had no political

right and couldn’t inherit any property either. They were even forbidden to leave homes after dark. Similarly, in most of parts of the world women were unable to take part in any social or political event.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminism started in late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the two key philosophers like John Stuart Mill and Mary Wollstone Craft. Feminism is defined as to provide equal rights to the women. Women have been fighting for the status of equality, suffragettes and autonomy. Even the 8<sup>th</sup> of March is celebrated as International Women’s day. The main feminist writers were Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*), Betty Friedan (*The Feminine Mystique*), Mary Wollstone Craft (*A Vindication Of The Rights Of Woman*), Fredrika Beamer (*The President’s Daughter*) and so on. But the real roots of feminism was traced back when Simone - de-Beauvoir wrote that “the first time we see a woman take up her pen in defense of her sex” was Christine de Pizan who wrote *Epitre au Dieud’Amour* (*Epistle to the God of Love*) in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. So, in a way we can say that the struggle of women intentionally or unintentionally started a long time ago. Doris Lessing also fought for gender inequality. Tawhida Akhter and AjoyBatta in a paper “Doris Lessing towards a Social Change: A Psychoanalytical Survey of her Select Works” has shown the role played by Lessing’s writings as, “The writer’s main motive behind this these story writing is to bring a social change in a society. No one is special and other is inferior only on the basis of color and Lessing fought for this menace throughout her life” [1]

The history of feminism has been divided into three phases by an American feminist Elaine Showalter. The three phases, according to her, are- feminine, feminist and female. The first phase was the muted phase in which the female writers just wanted to match the intelligence of male writers and they often wrote under the pseudonyms. The second phase is often called the protest phase in which the women protested for right to vote. The last phase which is still present is the phase of self - discovery. The females demanded for self-autonomous rule. Showalter coined a term Gynocriticism to describe feminine writing.

Showalter in her essay "Towards a Feminist Poetics" [2] says that the language is also male oriented. Even if we have to talk about both male and female as in terms of universal issue we say 'Man' representing both man and woman. Instead she says that Human should be used. So, according to her, everything is created by man to dominate woman. Even history is used against her. As she quotes one instance by saying that Cleopatra in history is represented in two different forms. Like Shakespeare in his play Julius Caesar has depicted her as Caesar's adopted daughter whereas G.B Shaw portrayed her as Caesar's concubine. So Showalter is against this false image given to woman. She comments even on the role of woman in pop culture where even if there is no need of a woman, still she is shown and that too naked. Showalter says that it is not only the fault of man but also woman who just for the sake of money is allowing man to use them.

Basically whatever feminism was in the world it was always bounded to white feminism. In a way it was biased and focused around white females only. The Third world Women were been neglected and ignored. Recently the Third World women found their part missing in feminism and they felt the need to write about themselves, because what actually was happening was that white woman was writing about them in her own perspective so it was the time to mend their history in the eyes of the world. They wanted to show that they were also suffering and the pain which was theirs could be expressed only through them. So all the Third World women started writing about themselves.

To talk about the African or Black feminism, then it can be said this movement focused not only on black females but females around the globe. Alice Walker, a black writer for the first time used a word "Womanism" for all the females of the world. Later Barbara Smith an Afro American writer used a word "Sisterhood" to express that she was not writing only for herself but all the women in the world.

India also welcomed this wave of feminism and many Indian writers came forward to write about their struggle and condition. But this feminism is still not prevalent in all parts of India. The women of India had to struggle a lot. In the colonial rule in India, the females were the easy targets. As GayatriSpivak says, "Subaltern as a female is even more deeply in shadow." [3]

After making such good steps towards women emancipation, women of India have still not attained that equality. Still women education is a big problem in most parts of India. Female infanticide is a crime in India but still it is carried out not only by the illiterates but even the so called literates. And if talk about the writings of the female writers in India then they can write with free will. If anybody writes bold and blunt

then she is condemned. The best example can be of Kamala Suraya (Kamala Das). She tried to write whatever has happened in her life but she was considered to be prostitute in writing so naked. Apart from this still in India we have great writers like Kamini Roy, Mahashweta Devi, Anita Desai, and so on.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The main objectives of this research work are:

- To explore the discrimination of people on the basis of gender.
- To universalize the concept of gender discrimination by focusing upon different characters from different parts of the world.
- To analyze the theological concept of gender discrimination in order to get the better understanding of the cultural roots that play a significant role in molding the psyche of the masses and to gain a better understanding of the modes in which theological principles or concepts are misinterpreted to gender discrimination.

## **3. METHODS**

The methods selected for the current study are: Comparative and Analytical Approach. The paper incorporates different feministic theories to understand the psychology of different characters in some of the selected works. All these methods are appropriate for the present study.

## **4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Women in most settled societies of the world and virtually all class societies have experienced low status, exploitation, oppression, and loss of self-determination. Even if they belonged to higher social classes, most women throughout their life have been enslaved by men. Until recent times, women throughout the world like in Europe, the Middle East and Asia were unable to have any influence over the political, religious or cultural lives of their societies. They don't own any property or inherit land and wealth, and were treated just as property themselves, in ancient Assyria, the punishment for rape was the handing over of the rapist's wife to the husband of his victim, to use as he desired. She has to pay the penalty of her husband's guilt and was never asked about it. In some cultures, what anthropologists have called ritual widow murder is when women would be killed or they have to kill themselves shortly after the deaths of their husbands. This was common throughout India and China until the twentieth century, it was known as Sati system in India.

Even in the so-called 'enlightened' society of ancient Greece, where the concept of democracy supposedly originated; women had no property or political rights, and were forbidden to leave their homes

after dark. Similarly, in ancient Rome women were unable to take part in any social event and were only allowed to leave their homes with their husband or a male relative. As we know that the status of women has risen significantly over the last few decades, but still in many parts of this cosmos the male domination and oppression still continues. The women don't have any role at all in determining their own lives; they are seen as nothing more than a commodity like other commodities in a house, property of the males of the family, and as owners, the men have the right to make decisions for them. Their male owners have the right to have sex with them on demand too.

In Egypt, majority of men and women believe it is acceptable for a man to beat his wife if she refuses sex. The oppression of women stems largely from men's desire for power and control. Since men feel the need to gain as much power and control as they can, they steal away power and control from women. They deny women the right to make decisions so that they can make them for them, leave women unable to direct their own lives so that they can direct their lives for them. The made decisions about their education, living, marriage and other things related to their lives. The subjugation is not only restricted to the current husband but may extend former husbands, and other family members such as parents, siblings, and in-laws. Globally, Subjugation of women within the family is universal across culture, religion, class, and ethnicity. Despite this widespread prevalence, however, such violence is not customarily acknowledged and has remained invisible because most of the women are socially and economically dependent on men. The acts of violence against members of the household, either wife or child, were perceived as discipline, particularly to maintain the rule of authority within the family.

Subjugation of women is predominant everywhere in world, in developing and as well as in developed countries. It occurs in many forms like abuse, psychological, sociological, economical, physical etc, yet the problem is often overlooked, excused, or denied. The abusers use varying tactics to forcibly to gain and to maintain power and control over the victims which leads to rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an partner and reported at least one impact related to experiencing these or other forms of violent behavior in the relationship i.e., feeling fearful, concern for safety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), need for health care, injury, crisis support, need for housing services, need for victim advocacy services, need for legal services, missed work or school. The main causes responsible for Subjugation of women are illiteracy and men dominance. Noticing and acknowledging the signs of an abusive relationship are the first step to end it. No one should live in fear of the person they love.

Actually very little is known about the actual living experiences of women who are in a Subjugated relationship. There are various impacts of subjugation which include physical injuries, mental health problems, social isolation, a growing faith as well as adverse effects on the children and on the women's self-worth.

From other aspect, the women also struggled to avoid negative labels given for being disrespectful to their men because of living in the conservative societies where women is expected to be silent, the more silent she is the more faithful she is. In addition various feminist findings have revealed four main themes related to the underlying issues on the needs and

support of subjugation of women within family that women drew on in their accounts. The social isolation component can also be intensified for women living in rural areas. These women have grown in an environment where there main concern is to look after their families either before or after marriage. The women have been taught since from their childhood that they are inferior to men both physically as well as socially. So, one can say that the subjugation of women starts to her birth.

Doris Lessing- a British writer in her novel *The Golden Notebook* has stated the theme of breakdown as a major theme in this novel. This social and political breakdown finally leads to the psychological breakdown. Doris Lessing has chosen an author Anna Wulf as her mouth piece to spoke out her inner feelings. It arises because of the inequality in relationships, sex, beliefs, work and politics. Anna Wulf is a writer who is a single parent and depends on the money got from the publication of her first novel *The Frontiers of War* and then after finds a block and becomes incapable of writing any other novel.

Yet I am incapable of writing the only kind of novel which interests me: a book powered with an intellectual or moral passion strong enough to create order, to create a new way of looking at life. It is because I am too diffused. I have decided never to write another novel [4]

The novel has been divided into six different sections first section is free women section followed by four different color notebooks and the final section called as Golden notebook. The protagonist Anna Wulf records all her experiences in these sections. Anna feels breakdown and conflict in her life, so in order to avoid the conflict, she keeps four different notebooks.

"I keep four notebooks," Anna explains to herself, "a black note- book, which is to do with Anna Wulf the writer; a red notebook, concerned with politics; a yellow notebook, in which I make stories out of my experience; and a blue notebook which tries to be a diary." [5]

There is a belief that domestic violence occurs more often in urban areas than rural, and the reason for this is that violence among rural women is vastly underreported. Most of the women in rural areas are illiterate or with less education, and are not able to stand on their own. They bear all the assaults and busy themselves in household works. So, their problems are unreported and unheard. Every woman who stays in a violent relationship will have her own reasons to do so. Her abuser could have made threats to her or her children, she could be facing poverty if she left, she may have been out of the workforce for years and lack skills and experience necessary to obtain employment, she may be a woman with few resources, or a recent immigrant dealing with a language barrier. She may have reached out to police or any other authority in the past and had found them not be helpful. She may be focused on surviving day to day instead of focusing on escape. She may feel ashamed of what she has endured, or guilty for leaving her partner. Whatever the specific

reasons, there is no universal answer for why women stay in abusive relationships, it may well be for multiple reasons, and it is much more complicated than 'just leaving'.

Kamala Das- an Indian writer throughout her literary career has fought for the rights of women. Tawhida Akhter in a research paper "Kamala Das: The Voice Of Indian Woman's Quest For Liberation" talks about the role of Kamala Das in contemporary times. Das has faced this oppression herself and wants to bring a change in society and made literature as a weapon to fight this menace from the society.

The poetess protests against the domination of the male and the consequent dwarfing of the female. The woman is expected to play certain conventional roles, and her own wishes and aspiration are not taken into account. The intensity of the protest, conveyed in conversational idiom and rhythm, make it symbolic of the protest of all womanhood against the male ego. [6]

According to available statistics from around the globe, one out of every three women has experienced violence in an intimate relationship at some point in her life. This is an average based on available national surveys across industrialized and developing countries. [7]

Fiction is a means of entirely describing destinies, feelings, circumstances and interpersonal relationships seems much more appropriate. This is because skilful fiction does not merely tell, depict, describe and explain but eventually involves and captivates the reader. This way, it causes a kind of emotional intimacy between the reader and the fictional characters which lets the reader approach differently and allows different conclusions. However, this seems to be constructive only when fiction claims to be realistic in one way or another e.g. historically accurate, politically relevant or critical. Tawhida Akhter in a paper entitled "Language as A Means to Break the Gender Inequality in Doris Lessing's African Works" talks about how society plays a vital role in shaping the personality of an individual. She points out that, "The society plays a vital role in shaping the social and personal life of its citizens"[8]. Woman did not write in the beginning as it now, the obvious reason as Virginia Woolf puts it, "A woman must have money and room of her own if she is to write fiction." [9]. Money symbolizes power and freedom and a room of her own is to have contemplative thinking. Very often women had enjoyed these things in the past so to develop their imaginative capabilities and personal freedom.

## 5. CONCLUSION

One of the major concerns of contemporary literature throughout the world has been to highlight the plight of oppressed individuals, women, their physical and emotional exploitation, and their mental anguish in their families by subjugating them within their families. Male domination in a woman's life is a natural phenomenon in a patriarchal society and the consequent suppression of the woman to a secondary position seem to have prompted women writers of the world to take up the cause of women. These writers focused on the dual image of women to break the shackles of their traditional position and search for their identity as an individual, rather than sacrificing at every step for the sake of their husbands and

children for their fathers and brothers. Traditionally, woman has been known to bear primary responsibility for the wellbeing of her family. Yet, she is discriminated against systematically and deprived of access to resources such as education, health care services, and jobs.

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