Samvid Multidisciplinary Research Journal
Where researchers meet their destiny...
ISSN 2582-015X

Challenging Patriarchy: The Evolution of the Female Protagonist in Victorian Literature

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Abstract

Victorian literature developed within a rigidly patriarchal social structure that restricted women's roles to domesticity and moral obedience. Yet the Victorian novel also became a powerful site for challenging these gender hierarchies. This paper examines the evolution of the female protagonist in Victorian fiction as a critique of patriarchy. Through a feminist critical framework, the study analyzes Jane Austen's Elizabeth

Bennet, Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, George Eliot's Dorothea Brooke, and Thomas Hardy's Tess Durbeyfield. It argues that these protagonists articulate an emerging feminist consciousness by asserting moral autonomy, intellectual independence, and resistance to patriarchal authority.

Keywords: Victorian Literature, Patriarchy, Female Agency, Feminist Criticism, Gender Studies.

Introduction

The Victorian era was marked by rigid gender hierarchies that privileged male authority in both public and private spheres. Women were legally and economically dependent, with marriage functioning as a key institution of patriarchal control. Despite these constraints, Victorian fiction increasingly foregrounded women's inner lives and moral struggles.

The Victorian era (1837–1901) was a period of rigid social stratification, defined largely by the "Separate Spheres" doctrine. This ideology relegated men to the public world of commerce and politics, while women were enshrined within the domestic sphere. The ideal Victorian woman was the "Angel in the House"—pious, submissive, and entirely devoid of personal ambition beyond the welfare of her family. However, as the century progressed, literature became a battleground for gender identity. Through the works of authors like Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy, the female protagonist evolved from a passive recipient of fate into a complex agent of social change.

Review of Literature

Feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter argue that women writers created a distinct literary tradition that challenged patriarchal representation. Gilbert and Gubar interpret Victorian heroines as figures caught between repression and rebellion. Elizabeth Langland's Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture (1995) remains a foundational text. Langland argues that the "Angel in the House" was not merely a passive victim of patriarchy but an active participant in class management. She suggests that by mastering the domestic sphere, Victorian women exercised a form of political power, even if it was confined to the home. This complicates the reading of characters like Dorothea Brooke, whose domestic failures can be viewed as a rejection of class performance as much as a search for intellectual fulfillment.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal work, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (1979), revolutionized the study of Charlotte Brontë. They posit that the monstrous or "mad" female characters in Victorian fiction—specifically Bertha Mason in Jane Eyre—act as "doubles" for the protagonists. These figures represent the repressed rage and sexual desires that the "proper" Victorian heroine was forced to conceal. This psychological framework allows researchers to see the evolution of the protagonist not just through dialogue, but through the gothic subtexts of the novels.

Elaine Showalter's A Literature of Their Own (1977) categorizes the evolution of women's writing into three stages: the Feminine (imitation of male standards), the Feminist (protest against standards), and the Female (self-discovery). Showalter places the late-Victorian transition from George Eliot to Thomas Hardy within the "Feminist" phase, where the female protagonist becomes a vehicle for social critique. More recent scholarship, such as that by Sally Ledger, focuses on the "New Woman" at the end of the century, arguing that characters in the 1890s functioned as a cultural "vanguard" that bridged the gap between Victorian domesticity and the political activism of the 20th century.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study adopts feminist literary criticism and close textual analysis to examine representations of female agency in selected Victorian novels.

Early Feminist Resistance: Jane Austen

Elizabeth Bennet in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice represents an early challenge to patriarchal norms through wit, intelligence, and moral independence. In the mid-Victorian period, Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre (1847) served as a seismic shift in literary representation. Unlike the heroines of early 19th-century "silver fork" novels, Jane is "poor, obscure, plain, and little." Her rebellion is not initially political, but deeply personal and psychological.

Jane's famous declaration to Mr. Rochester—"I am not bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will"—challenged the notion that a woman's soul was

subordinate to a man's. Brontë utilizes the "Gothic" elements of the novel to mirror Jane's internal struggle against patriarchal confinement, most notably through the figure of Bertha Mason, the "madwoman in the attic," who represents the destructive consequences of repressed female rage.

Moral Autonomy and Intellectual Aspiration

Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre demands moral and emotional equality, while George Eliot's Dorothea Brooke exposes the frustration of female intellect constrained by patriarchal marriage. By the late 1860s and 70s, the focus shifted toward intellectual and social agency. George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) introduced Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch. Dorothea is a protagonist defined by her desire for "greatness" and meaningful labor.

The Marriage Trap: Dorothea's initial mistake—marrying the elderly scholar Casaubon—highlights the limited outlets for female intellect. She seeks a mentor but finds a master.

The Unsung Life: Eliot's conclusion suggests that while the "Angel" trope was dying, society was not yet ready for a female Saint Theresa. Dorothea's influence becomes "diffusive," affecting the world in small, unhistorical acts.

Patriarchy and Female Suffering: Thomas Hardy

In Tess of the d'Urbervilles, Hardy critiques patriarchal sexual morality that punishes women while excusing male transgression.The late Victorian period saw a total dismantling of the moral pedestals women were forced to occupy. Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles (1891) provocatively subtitled "A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented," challenged the "fallen woman" narrative. By portraying Tess as a victim of both male violence (Alec d'Urberville) and rigid social morality (Angel Clare), Hardy placed the blame for female ruin squarely on patriarchal double standards.

This paved the way for the "New Woman" of the 1890s—protagonists who cycled, worked, and sought sexual autonomy, directly preceding the Suffragette movement of the Edwardian era.

Evolution of the Victorian Female Protagonist

Victorian female protagonists evolve from socially constrained figures to morally conscious individuals who challenge patriarchal authority. The evolution of the female protagonist in Victorian literature reflects a systematic dismantling of the "Angel in the House" myth. What began as a quiet internal longing for equality in the early works of the Brontës transformed into a vocal, intellectual, and eventually physical demand.

Conclusion

The Victorian novel emerges as a crucial site for challenging patriarchy through its female protagonists. By the end of the nineteenth century, the literary female protagonist was no

longer merely a domestic fixture or a moral barometer for the male hero. She had become a subversive force, mirroring the real-world shift toward the suffrage movement. These fictional journeys from the domestic hearth to the public sphere did more than just reflect society; they actively reshaped the cultural imagination, proving that the "proper" place for a woman was wherever she chose to stand.

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