Chapter-1

Image of Women in European Drama and Her Position Thereof
IMAGE OF WOMEN IN EUROPEAN DRAMA AND HER POSITION THEREOF

England has had a long tradition of drama and its association with theatre. It has witnessed two great periods in the history of its drama. The first being Renaissance or Shakespeare’s age, and the second confusingly called the Renaissance of the British Drama featuring George Bernard Shaw and the ‘New Drama’. Ironically, as the history of English drama testifies, we do not find any woman playwright upto the modern period. It speaks volumes about the state and status of women in the western society as we do not find them as the members of the elite superstructure that is dominated by the male writers. We are bound to think as to how females, having any semblance of literary taste and an urge to express themselves in the largely male dominated society, might have been feeling about themselves as far as their relationship with the power structure of that time is concerned. Whether it be the drama rich Elizabethan period, or the transitional period or even the democratically live Victorian period, we do not feel but the absence of women on the stage, though they have been widely represented by males in all the genres of literature. This absence demands a critical thought and invites our attention to the study of that domineering structure of power that has been the epicentre of western metaphysics and has been only recently dismantled and demolished when the ‘New women’ is finally born.

The primary observation of British theatre noted the absence of women as writers of plays and other forms of writing, be it
history, poetry, prose etc. This absence of women, both from literary and non-literary texts, demands our critical attention as to why they are hidden from the historical and literary texts as Virginia Woolf in her polemic essay, *A Room Of One’s Own*, signals this absence of women from classical tradition and associates this absence with the political, social and economic conditions of their time in which they existed. The fact that there was no significant number of existing texts written by women for the stage until the seventeenth century produced a rather astounding sense of absence in the classical traditions of the theatre.¹

This absence of women on the stage led many feminist historians including Virginia Woolf to concentrate on periods in which they did emerge primarily in the seventeenth century in England, the nineteenth century in America and the twentieth century in Europe and America. When Virginia Woolf wrote her book *A Room of One’s Own* in 1930 it became possible to study the image of women in western plays written by men in the classical period. She illustrated in her book a way to recognize and interpret the images of women in male literature as misogynist. Since women are absent from the pages of history, so we have to rely on the literary texts produced by male writers such as William Shakespeare, the most prolific and versatile genius of Elizabethan age since it is believed that literature of a period expresses the spirit of the age.

This textual discovery of women in these works may be attributed to the popular works of Kate Millet (*Sexual Politics:*

---

1970) and Virginia Woolf’s (A Room Of One’s Own: 1930). They interpreted the image of women in male literature as biased and misogynist.

When we try to trace the history of women writers or women in general, we do not find the actual woman there as there is not a fixed or a stable history which can facilitate a sound historical background for the study of female consciousness. As poststructuralist thought has made it clear that history is always narrated and past can never be available to us in pure form but always in the form of representations, in other words history is textualized, so it could be assumed that the image of women in English literature is also a construction of the male writers of different times. Past always becomes something we construct from already written texts of all kinds, whether it be history, medical science, law journals or literary texts etc. The representation of women or their experience is then actually a representation of representation.²

Since our focus is on literary texts to draw an image and experience of actual women, it would definitely invite our attention towards the application of some theoretical perspectives on these texts, as literary texts are not different from non-literary texts produced by lawyers, popular writers, theologians, scientists and historians as far as their representation of women is concerned. In fact, the sublimity of literary text is lost when a particular ideology creeps into it and its universality is hampered to a greater degree. The privileged ‘inner world’ of great authors cannot be set against

the background of an ‘outer world’ of ordinary people. The images of women presented in the works of great authors like Shakespeare or Aristotle are then the products of socio-economic, cultural and political realities of the time. The images drawn by these authors show their unconscious mind which is already structured with the preconceived notions of the time. So, the representation of women in their works is an ideological construct and not their independent creation.

Woman as a gender is a social construct and this construction may be challenged and transformed. As women are hidden from the history and are represented by male writers, this feature of English literature points out the domination of phallocentric discourse, hence the conclusion that women are trapped inside a male ‘truth’. The logocentric western culture which is male dominated has forced women to periphery, partly because of their biology and preconceived notions about women being of inferior sex. Helene Cixous, a French feminist philosopher and writer, calls this western logocentricism as a philosophical system of oppositions which is hierarchal in nature and insidious in effect. In this binary system of oppositions, woman becomes a passive partner and is not allowed any control over her destiny. In this patriarchal system, male becomes a centre or frame of reference wherefrom female is described or defined.

The society which is male dominated does not consider it normal or rational for women to enter a male dominated sphere of writing, acting or decision making and jettison or jeopardize their

---

authority. In fact, women are silenced and excluded from the text by this type of mindset that prevails throughout the evolution of English literature. Women writers, writing in the earlier periods of history might have found themselves in a great void as they were not recognized and appreciated by the institutions and official organs of patriarchy. However, it is not possible to think against the system until and unless one does not create some space for oneself in the establishment. And being in the system, it becomes imperative to respect its rules and regulations. As women were assigned domestic and menial jobs by the system and were not have allowed to rise against the expectations of the same, it was but natural that their resistance would also evolve from adoption to adaptation and then to adepion. Women who were or are working within a particular discursive practice cannot think or speak without obeying the unspoken ‘archive’ of rules and constraints as doing so amounts to taking the risk of being condemned to madness or silence.⁴

Societal constraints and prohibitions especially educational systems define what is rational and scholarly. As women were barred to enter in any social institution, be it education or religion, save domestic activities, their educational and literary upliftment was bound to be hampered and constrained. This exploitation of women by their male counterparts speaks volumes about their condition. Infact, they lacked the financial support, avenues of earning money, education, etc. necessary for literary enterprise. Even if they earned the money it was impossible for them to keep it

as the law denied them the right to possess what ever money they earned.\(^5\)

This shows history as a class struggle in which one group exploits the other and this exploitation gives rise to alienation. These alienated groups undergo the process of ‘reification’ and are treated as oppressed or objects rather than human beings.\(^6\) Thus, the very power structure of western society denied women the necessary education and the right to earn money, thereby forcing them to marginal positions as ‘other’. If they had got this opportunity, the scenario would have been altogether different as Virginia Woolf comments:

> We might have been exploring or writing; mooning about the venerable places of the earth; sitting contemplative on the steps of the Parthenon, or going at ten to an office and coming home comfortably at half past four to write a little poetry. Only, if Mrs Seton and her like had gone to business at the age of fifteen, there would have been - that was the snag in the argument - no Mary.\(^7\)

It again reiterates the fact that the dominant structure of a patriarchal society posits women as ‘other’ and consistently denies women the right to individual existence and expression.

---


\(^7\) *A Room Of One’s Own*, p-30.
The socio-economic factors that are responsible for oppressing women and forcing them to marginalized positions reveal that one can not indulge in creative activities in such conditions when there is a question of mere survival. Since our focus is on written literary texts to understand the socio-political and economic factors as well as the experience of actual woman, as women are absent from history and we do not have ample texts written by women, so one has to rely on those texts for image and position of women written by men.

A cursory reading of Aristotle’s *Poetics* and William Shakespeare’s *Othello* and *Hamlet* shows the image of women as constructed by patriarchal mind. One may believe that the portrayal of women characters in these works relates to the lives of actual women, however, it represents a fiction of women constructed by men. In recent decades, a ground breaking research was done in cultural studies such as New Historicism and Cultural Materialism which challenged the old tradition of reading literary text as an ultimate and valued thing. In other words, it juxtaposed literary texts with non-literary texts such as law journals, medical books and histories in which literary text was foregrounded and non-literary text was its background. As all knowledge is in a contextualised form, be it literary or non-literary, the result is that there is no absolute truth therefore relativity of meaning is a natural fact and the idea of absolute or stable text ceases to exist. This textuality of literary and non-literary texts deconstructs the fact of absolute truth. Hence the image of woman in literary and non-literary texts could be also challenged and deconstructed so as the
real woman may be discovered as has been attempted to do by various feminist writers and critiques.

Sue-Ellen Case in her paper “Classic Drag: The Greek Creation of Female Parts” argues that there are two types of images that still predominate in the feminist criticism of historical texts. These images are commonly identified as being one of the two basic types: “Positive roles, which depict women as independent, intelligent, and even heroic and surplus of misogynistic roles commonly identified as the Bitch, the Witch, the vamp, or the virgin Goddess”.

These images of women reflect the male dramatists’ mind as a social construct and a theatrical tradition on women. These images are misleading and they infact stereotype the actual women who might have lived in the period.

Aristotle in his polemic book Poetics related the patriarchal prejudice against women to the nature of the dramatic experience and to the role of the audience. Aristotle’s views about the women can be deduced from several of his criteria regarding the nature of dramatic character in chapter 15 of this work:

First, and most important, it must be good. Now any speech or action that manifests moral purpose of any kind will be expressive of character: the character will be good if the purpose is good. This rule is relative to each class. Even a woman may be good, and also a slave; though the

---

8 ‘Classic Drag: The Greek Creation of Female parts’, pp-317-318
woman may be said to be an inferior being, and slave quite worthless. The second thing to aim at is propriety. There is a type of manly valour; but valour in a women, or unscrupulous cleverness, is in-appropriate.⁹

In his deliberations on tragic characters, Aristotle holds the opinion that for being tragic one must be good. The absence of male in his discussion illustrates that the male citizen is the standard of the good, but that this quality may even be found in others. He relates goodness to a class, but more importantly he relates class to gender. He treats slaves as a class, comparable to women, a gender. The class hierarchy, as he suggests it, puts the male citizen on top, women citizen on the next inferior level and slaves on the bottom. Although slaves are capable of goodness, yet they are not subjects of tragedy because they are “ignoble” or “worthless”. The Greek tragedy is a province of royal houses in which women seem to inhabit an ambiguous station. Though they may be potential subjects of the tragedy, yet, as Aristotle implies, they would be inferior to male subject.

Action is the second good quality of a dramatic character in Poetics. The tragic character must perform action appropriate to his character. According to Aristotle, appropriateness of action is a quality of the noble character as is goodness. He makes this point in reference to the action of bravery and the functions of intelligence - action which is appropriate to tragic character. For it is possible for a person to be manly in terms of character, but it is

not appropriate for a woman to exhibit either this quality or intellectual cleverness that is associated with men. Bravery and man are interchangeable terms, indicating that the male gender and bravery are one and the same. It is not appropriate for women to be manly or to be brave or clever. Cleverness is a gender specific quality necessary for the tragic character, but unavailable to women. Manliness, which connotes bravery to some, is another appropriate quality which does not reside in the class of women.

Here Aristotle’s assumptions rest upon the intersection of social reality and aesthetic prescriptions. In both realms, women are the outsiders. They function only to provide the limits of the male subject, which help to complete his outline, or they illustrate differences from him which highlight his qualities. Once again, women are invisible - there are no qualities ascribed to them, and their invisibility provides the empty space which organises the focus on the male subject. In this way, they are subjects of tragic action only insofar as they might help to define the character.

Beyond the requirements of character, however, women’s exclusion from intellectual cleverness may also exclude them from the entire experience of drama, art, or mimesis. Historians are uncertain about the composition of the Greek audience. The reason may be that it was restricted to citizens. It is quite possible that no woman was included. Besides, Euripides used to jest women in the audience in some of his plays and this may suggest the presence of women in the theatre. Judging from the gender specific quality of Athenian practice and Aristotle’s thoughts on tragedy, it would seem appropriate that women were not in the audience or, as mentioned above, women were inferior members among audiences.
In other words, not only is the male the subject of theatre practice and tragic character, but he is the exclusive recipient of the theatrical experience.

The function of thought, in the Aristotle’s system, is to enable correct choices. The function of pity, fear, and recognition is to teach audiences about correct choices and to stimulate their pleasure from the recognition. Aristotle has excluded women from the powers of deliberation when he comments:

Third in order is Thought, - that is, the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in given circumstances. In the case of oratory, this is the function of the political art and of the art rhetoric; and so indeed the older poets make their characters speak the language of civic life; the poets of our time, the language of the rhetoricians. Character is that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids. Speeches, therefore, which do not make this manifest or in which speaker does not choose or avoid anything whatever, are not expressive of character.10

It is imperative then the women have no need to learn about choices as they are without the authority of choice. Therefore, the

---

10 Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art, p-29.
drama has no function for them and they are excluded from the pleasure of watching it.

It is now possible to conclude that women were excluded from the categories of tragic character, from cleverness, from the authority of deliberation, and from dialogue. In fact, woman seems to be excluded from the dramatic experience. The drama is not appropriate to the class of gender “Woman”. Thus it may be concluded that the Greeks have excluded the gender called “Woman” from the stage altogether as they did not find them suitable for acting and writing plays.

British theatre is no exception to Greek theater. It seemed that the Britain’s were also carrying the legacy of Greek masters in banishing the women from the stage. The Elizabethan period in the Britian is considered the great period of its drama. It was the age of renaissance and enlightenment; but on the contrary, it seemed Elizabethan period has not yet come out of its barbaric past. In this period, women were uneducated, they were forced to act submissively and never express their opinions. Even though there was the unmarried woman on the throne but the role of a woman in society was very limited. The Elizabethans had very clear expectations of men and women, and in general men were expected to be the bread winners and women to be housewives and mothers. Child bearing was considered a great honour to women. As Elizabethan society was patriarchal, obviously that men were considered to be the leaders and the women their inferior. Women were regarded as “the weaker sex” not just in terms of physical strength, but emotionally too. It was believed that women always needed someone to look after them. Marriage symbolized their
dependence on men. If they were single, then their father, brother or another male relative were expected to take care of them. They were confined to narrow domestic spheres and were often unhappy, oppressed and commonly abused by their tyrannical husbands. Professor Trevelyan’s *History of England* as quoted by Virginia Woolf may testify to this fact:

‘Wife beating’, I read, ‘was a recognized right of man, and was practiced without shame by high as well as low. …Similarly, the historian goes on, ‘the daughter who refused to marry the gentleman of her parents’ choice was liable to be locked up, beaten and flung about the room, without any shock being inflicted on public opinion. Marriage was not an affair of personal affection, but of family avarice, particularly in the “chivalrous” upper classes. …Betrothal often took place while one or both of the parties was in the cradle, and marriage when they were scarcely out of the nurses’ charge’. That was about 1470, soon after Chaucer’s time.¹¹

Woolf draws a lucid picture of position of women in the Chaucerian period from Professor Trevelyan’s *History of England.* She further argues that Trevelyan is an unbiased historian when he concludes “neither Shakespeare’s women nor those of authentic seventieth century memoirs, like the Verneys and the Hutchinson’s seem wanting in personality and character”.¹² Woolf approves

---

¹¹ *A Room Of One’s Own*, pp-49-50.
¹² Ibid, p-50.
Trevelyan’s statement that Shakespeare’s women do not seem wanting in personality and character. In fact, she argues that women have burnt like beacons in all the works of all the poets from the beginning of the time. There are glorious, beautiful and intelligent women like Clytemnestra, Antigone, Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, Cressida, Rosalind, Desdemona, the Duchess of Malfi, among the dramatists’, yet they are the women who exist only in fiction and have no life out side the imagination of male writers. Professor Trevelyan’s statement is beautifully summed up by Woolf here:

Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband.¹³

William Shakespeare, the great genius of all times, had an extraordinary genius for portraying human behaviour. He consciously or unconsciously depicted the condition of women within a patriarchal system and created women characters which in

---

¹³ *A Room Of One’s Own, p-51.*
their richness transcend the limitations of his time. The way he portrays women characters in his plays shows his male-centered mind that compelled him to create such vociferous and evil female characters. In his plays, the roles of women are often played by young boys. This may suggest that acting was considered dishonorable for women and women did not appear on the stage in England until the seventeenth century.

Shakespeare wrote Hamlet in 1603. Hamlet is a play of its time in the presentation of female characters. There are only two women in the play, Gertrude, Hamlet’s mother and Ophelia, Hamlet’s beloved, the daughter of Polonius. Throughout the play, there is an evidence of the patriarchal society of its time. In the play, Ophelia seems wholly at the mercy of the male figures within her life and is certainly a victim figure. Hamlet throughout the play uses Ophelia as a tool in his revenge plan.

Ophelia is dependent on men, Polonius, Laertes, her brother, and Hamlet. She gradually loses the men she so strongly depends upon. Her father prevented her from seeing Hamlet, her brother moved away and later on the father was killed. The loss of these men leads to her mental instability, the cause of her later suspected suicide.

Hamlet is unique among Shakespear’s tragic heroes for not being to blame for the tragedy of the play. It’s Queen Gertrude’s behaviour that has instigated Hamlet’s unforgivable treatment of Ophelia. Gertrude transgresses the patriarchal bounds of feminity by marrying so soon after her husband’s death and not remaining in passive grief and obedient devotion to his memory. This provides
Hamlet with a model of women’s inconstancy. His bitterness leads him to believe that all women are untrustworthy as he says:

   Frailty, thy name is woman-
   A little month, or ere those shoes were old
   With which she follow’d my poor father’s body,
   …O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
   Would have mourn’d longer- married with my uncle,
   My father’s brother- but no more like my father
   Than I to Hercules.14

Hamlet projects upon Ophelia the ‘guilt and pollution’ he believes exists in Gertrude’s behaviour. Thus Ophelia suffers as a result of Hamlet’s patriarchal values of womanhood.

With regard to her father and brother, the two direct ruling male forces in her life, Ophelia is also very much a victim. Unquestionably obeying their remonstrances against pursuing a relationship with Hamlet, she rejects his advances, which of course she believes to be genuine and thus when he pretends to be mad she believes it to be her fault. Her speech reflects her deep and genuine sorrow:

   And I, of ladies most dejected and wretched,
   That suck’d the honey of his music vows,
   Now see that noble and most sovereign reason

---

Like sweet bells jangled out of tune and harsh,
That unmatch’d form and features of blown youth
Blasted with ecstasy. O vow is me.\textsuperscript{15}

Ophelia’s feeling of guilt is reinforced by Polonius’s insistence to king Claudius:

\begin{quote}
But yet do I believe
The origin and commencement of his grief
Sprung from neglected love. How now, Ophelia?\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Polonius’s conviction, in which one can not help believing, stem from a mercenary desire to marry his daughter off to such an eligible husband as the prince of Denmark rather than a genuine belief in his daughter’s role in causing Hamlet’s madness. Thus, when Hamlet murders her father, Ophelia enters a double realm of guilt, believing herself to be to blame for both Hamlet’s madness and her father’s death and as a result she becomes mad.

The presentation of women as weak characters shows Shakespeare’s male-centered point of view. Hamlet while talking to his mother takes control of the conversation by showing her little respect:

\begin{quote}
Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed
Stew’d in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty!\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, p-285.
\textsuperscript{16} Hamlet, p-286.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, p-324.
This is a disrespectful and crude way to talk to one’s mother. Gertrude’s only input in the conversation is answering questions and attempting to understand her son’s berating. She has no control over the contents of the conversation making her appear powerless. To a modern audience, Hamlet’s treatment of his mother would cause shock because of the lack of respect as he controls her. It would be seen as degrading towards women as women are now seen on an equal intellectual level as men. It would seem as a form of sexist abuse and unjustified anger. To an Elizabethan audience, the play would have been a portrayal of everyday life, in the way women were treated.

In Shakespeare, the female characters often get a weak voice and the audience are never allowed to see their characters develop, suggesting they are less important. The female characters being suppressed in the play helps to present to a modern reader the way of life at the time Shakespeare lived and how women were suppressed in every way, from being mentally inferior to being less developed in a play.

Gertrude makes little contribution to the play in a way of inspirational speeches. However, her quick marriage to Claudius is one reason of Hamlet’s anger, this anger being the main theme of the play. She has a large part in play, even if it is a slightly concealed presence. Like many women of her time, her presence was not always noted but her actions had effects on family and surroundings.

At no point in the play do Gertrude and late king Hamlet communicate. The Ghost does, however, talk about the widow
when in conversation with Hamlet, the Ghost refers to Gertrude in the following way:

Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts-
O wicked wit, and gifts that have the power,
So to seduce!- won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen.\(^\text{18}\)

This statement raises the question to the audience that Gertrude was a loyal wife to Hamlet whilst he was alive. The Elizabethans were religious people, therefore, adultery would have been viewed as a ghastly sin. This thread in the story would have shocked an Elizabethan audience and to them the play would appear engulfed with evil and corruption. While as a modern audience would see it as controversial, however, they would not be as shocked by the thought of adultery as Elizabethans would be and it shows the change in social and moral values of a society from time to time.

It is not clear whether she actually did commit adultery as the Ghost suggests and Hamlet suspects, or whether she was simply wooed and tricked into loving the cunning Claudius. She is, however, given an aside, which suggests she has something to answer for:

To my sick soul, as sin’s true nature is,
Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss.
So full of artless jealousy is guilt,
It spills itself in fearing to be split.\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{18}\) *Hamlet*, p-218.  
\(^{19}\) *Hamlet*, p-348.
She feels guilty for what she had done, and understands that it is partly her fault that her son is in this state of madness. She could also be feeling guilty about the fact that her son killed Ophelia’s father.

A modern audience would feel that Gertrude’s marriage was too hasty and they would understand Hamlet’s anger, however, an Elizabethan audience would have mixed thoughts on this point. At that time women were kept to family confines, if they were not married they were looked down upon and would have had no social stance so it was seen better to remarry. However, if a woman did not remarry, society would see her as a burden, being single and having no one to secure her financially, a fast remarriage could also be seen as desperation to get back into a social stance and be provided for. Women could not win; they were criticized for both decisions.

The extent of Gertrude’s sin is one of the questions throughout the play. Did she commit adultery? Was she involved in the murder of her husband? None of these questions are answered with any certainty in the play. However, when Hamlet suggests to her that the king was murdered, “A bloody deed, Almost as bad, good mother, As kill a king, and marry with his brother”\textsuperscript{20}, Gertrude is definitely portrayed as a construction of Hamlet’s mind, or in other words, the image of a bitch woman does surface explicitly from this description. The way Gertrude is interpreted in the play depicts her as woman behind a powerful man, a woman of the time, vulnerable and uncertain of her social stance.

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Hamlet}, p-320.
It appears that Gertrude will try anything to keep her life simple and problem free. She even changes her language and the way she speaks to soften the shock on Laertes when she explains about Ophelia’s death, she describes her death as “mermaid like” as if using pleasant language would not make it seem such a horrific death. By making Ophelia’s death sound peaceful and comfortable, she hopes it will not upset him so much. Gertrude may act like this because she has been oppressed by her husband, and probably her farther before, she has not had the chance to exercise certain emotions so as to unsure how to deal with situations, like grief; she did not have time to grieve for her husband. This might have been true of many women at that time as Elizabethan women were expected to remarry and move on with their lives.

In comparison, Ophelia does not make any leading speeches, most of the time she just answers the questions. In Elizabethan time, this would have been how women behaved. Ophelia lives up to her filial duty; she is obedient and often looks to her father for guidance. In Act I Scene III, when Polonius asks her question she avoids answering the question, in fear of saying the wrong thing she replies by saying “I do not know, my lord, what I should think.” This shows Ophelia as a weak character because she lets the men in her life tell her what to think, she has no independence and relies solely on guidance from her father and brother.

Ophelia has no freedom. This is shown through her relationship with her dominating father. Ophelia’s rejection of Hamlet, who defies her feelings for him, demonstrate her obedience

---

21 Hamlet, p-204.
to her father. By telling her father that he “My lord, he hath importun’d me with love. In honorable fashion”\textsuperscript{22} she implies that he is decent and honorable and she has feelings for him. Ophelia’s later actions sacrifice these feelings, under the order of her father, providing her complete submission. In particular, Ophelia agrees not to see Hamlet anymore after the order from her father. Ophelia’s actions show that Polonius has complete control over his daughter. She sacrifices her feelings and emotions to obey him.

The theme of sexuality runs throughout the play. In the Ghost’s first appearance in Scene I he speaks of his widow as “seeming virtuous”. Hamlet refers to her sheets as “incestuous”. Both of these descriptions of Gertrude’s remarriage and sexuality portary her sleeping habits as a crime. These accusations would equally shock a modern and Elizabethan audience, which is an example of how some situations are never morally accepted in a society. The culmination of Gertrude’s alleged affair and her criminal sexuality would create her to appear quite villainous.

Ophelia is seen in her madness in Act IV Scene V. Her conversation contains sexual references which, from what we have already seen of Ophelia appears out of character. There is a speech to corroborate this fact about Ophelia:

> Young men will do’t if they come to’t-
> By Cock, they are to blame.
> Quoth she, ‘Before you tumbled me,
> You promis’d me to wed’.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, p-205.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Hamlet}, p-351.
This speech shows the true reality of her illness due to her changes in character and language. Men are to blame for her madness; their advice leads to Hamlet’s rejection of her because of her rejection of him. An Elizabethan audience would be shocked by her altered language because it would not have been right for females to talk about sex in public. Today this would shock an audience far less because women speak freely about any thing. It is clear to the audience that Ophelia is ill, therefore, the audience would not dislike her because of her disrespectful language; instead they would sympathize with her.

As already mentioned, women during the Elizabethan period were taught submissive behaviour. When Shakespeare wrote *Othello*, women were uneducated and were forced to act submissively. Shakespeare, by using female character in this play, portrayed women in such a way as if she had not risen from the ashes of the original sin. The tragedy of Othello occurs from the adherence to patriarchal rules and stereotypes. This tragedy stems from men’s misunderstanding of women and women’s inability to protect themselves, from the society’s conception of them. Certainly, Desdemona’s very much feminized qualities of passivity, softness and obedience are no match to Othello’s masculine qualities of dominance, aggression and authority. After Othello in his jealousy has struck Desdemona and spoken harshly to her, she tells Iago, “He might have chid me. So; for, in good faith, I am a child to chiding”\(^\text{24}\), protected by a system which makes the women the weaker, dependent sex. Desdemona is unequipped to deal with

such aggression; she is helpless against Othello. It may be inferred that these women, by following conventional patterns of behaviour, lose their autonomy and intimacy and do not achieve adulthood. Desdemona thus retreats into childhood like behaviour to escape from reality.

Iago’s manipulation of Othello—the cause of the tragedy—may occur only because of the views of women the moor already possessed. This is certainly a convincing argument, for Othello all-too easily accepts a stereotypical view of his wife based on the authority of male voice. He looses sight of the real Desdemona, allowing every action of hers, once his suspicion is stimulated, to reaffirm this stereotypical conception of hers.

At the close of the play, Othello attempts to vindicate himself from intentional murder by claiming that he did nothing ‘in malice’, but is simply a man ‘that loved not wisely, but too well’.²⁵ This speech illustrates the precarious position of love in a society submerged in stereotypes. Othello’s excessive, ‘unwise’ love for Desdemona is tied up with his perception of her as representing perfect womanhood and his underlying fears of her endorsed by society-as-whore. Like Hamlet, who tells Ophelia ‘get thee to nunnery’ in order to protect her chastity and remove his fear of woman’s infidelity, Othello too wishes to erase Desdemona’s sexuality and potential for infidelity. By his decision to kill her, he claims to prevent her from a further transgression, ‘Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men’.²⁶ As Iago’s insinuations built, the gulf between this perception of Desdemona as angel and the fear of

²⁵*Othello*, p-185
²⁶*Othello*, p-172.
her being a whore grows, leading Othello in a void of confusion of doubt:

…By the world,
I think my wife be honest, and think she is not
I think thou art (Iago) just, and then think thou art not.\(^\text{27}\)

In Othello’s refusal to hear Desdemona’s own protestations of innocence, Othello is very much a tragedy in which the female is subordinated by the male.

Thus, it may be inferred from the above discussion that Elizabethan women were totally dominated by the male members of their family. They were expected to obey not only their father but also their brothers and many male members of the family. The underlying belief was that the woman belongs to a weaker sex, hence she can not express herself fully well and can not represent herself in the largely male-dominated society. Therefore, she was represented as a woman by her male-counterparts. What we find actually is that the male writers of different periods of British literature did the representation of representation as far as their female subjects were concerned.

Plays by men have dominated our stages for so long that the male view of life is considered to be representative of the entire human condition. We do not find any professional woman playwright from middle ages until the restoration period when Charles II had been in exile in France where actresses dominated the stage and on his return to England he wanted to see women

\(^{27}\) Ibid, p-130.
acting women’s roles, instead of the practice of having boys play women. Aphra Behn is popularly known as Britain’s first professional women playwright. However, before her aristocratic women had written plays for courtly masques, one such example is Hrostwitha in the tenth-century, she was a nun and wrote religious plays in Latin, modeled on the plays of Terence and were performed by the nuns in the convent. But we can only guess at the kind of audience they played to. In this all female world, Hrostwitha was protected from male authority and allowed the time and space to develop her dramatic craft.

From restoration period women started writing plays but they have disappeared from our stages because they have failed to be included in the dramatic literary ‘canon’ that is passed from generation to generation. However, the beginnings of theatre history is assigned traditionally to the plays and practices of Athenian festivals of Dionysus in sixth and fifth century B.C. as Sue–Ellen Case notes in her paper “Classic Drag : The Greek Creation of Female Parts” that the notion of plays, acting, physical theatre space, costume mask, and relation of play to audience begin with these Athenian festivals. In the sixth century, both women and men participated in these ceremonies, but by the fifth century, when the ceremonies were becoming what is known as theatre, women disappeared from the practice. Historians and scholars are silent about the fact why women disappeared from the stage. There is no evidence for the specific date or occasion of the beginning of their omission.

We do not find women playwrights up to the nineteenth century with an exception here and there viz. in Restoration period as women started appearing as actresses on the stage. Aphra Behn is unanimously considered as the first professional woman playwright of Britain who wrote for the stage in the late seventeenth century. She was a middle class woman and is of the opinion that her husband’s death forced her in this profession. She became a successful playwright but could not protect herself from the male gaze because her writing career as a woman was going against the accepted beliefs of her time. Women were expected to do menial jobs and other domestic activities like cooking food, rearing children rather than indulging in writing which is exclusively a male domain Aphra Bahn holds a prominent position as she made her living by writing plays and paved the way for other women to write. As Michelene Wander comments:

The ambiguous position which women held in the theatre in those early days also extended to her; she was respected for her art and her politics, but she also represented a threat, as a woman who was economically and sexually independent that is more like a ‘man’ than a ‘woman’ and gossip reviled her for her supposed immorality, where it ignored the same behavior in men.29

Theatre has been a commercial enterprise and in fact stands on its material gains. Plays are meant to be enacted on the stage and

---

its success depends upon audience, and the approval of directors and producers. Women writing for the theatre had to face many hurdles and obstructions in getting their plays performed. This is because of theatre’s hegemonic history. Theatre as an institution is male dominated. They only think in terms of loss and gain. Women writers are often considered to be unsuitable for long term investment. There is also a mistaken belief held by theatre goers that women’s plays are domestic in nature and attracts a ‘specialized’ audience of women only. In other words, plays by women do not have universal appeal.

Women writers in the earlier periods of their emergence had a contradictory situation to deal with. Firstly, they do lack tradition. They had no tradition of great writers behind them like male writers of all ages have; secondly, they had to face the harsh criticism whenever they wrote and lastly, being a woman, had to hide their identities in order to avoid male bias and thus wrote under pseudonyms.

As writers of plays, women scarcely figured on the literary map till twentieth century. However, they indulged in other forms of literary activities such as novel, diaries, letter writing etc. In the eighteenth century, women started writing novels in their privacy leaving the public world of book publishing and distribution to men. Their reading public largely consisted of women who were also writing and reading in private. The works of these women were being published and widely acclaimed, but the fact that they were women called for the censure and result was male pseudonym. The women wrote under male names in order to avoid rejection and harsh criticism of their works. Mary Ann Evans wrote under the
pseudonyms George Elliot, Emily Bronte under the name of Acton Bell. As Michelene Wandor makes a pertinent comment:

The use of the male pseudonym was a response to a double standard: The work was in demand but there was a misogynist resentment at the women writing it. Such women were transgressing the Victorian belief that womanhood should be a passive vocation in itself.\(^{30}\)

So, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in England, most work by female authors was not seen by male critics as important enough to earn their help in preserving it or future, so both books and reputation were lost to time. However, Jane Austen is the only woman writer who has a well established place in the traditional canon before Charlotte and Emily Bronte, George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell turn up in the middle of nineteenth century. But recent historical and feminist research has shown that lots of women were writing when Jane Austen was alive, and many were well known by the reading public. And these women were, in act, following the footsteps of generations female authors.

Despite this well established tradition so far as novel writing is concerned, all female authors in Jane Austen’s time faced a number of obstacles. The opinion of the society was that unless they were rich enough to have uninterrupted leisure time, women should treat writing as just a hobby and concentrate on their domestic duties as a wife, mother, daughter, or sister. Another

\(^{30}\) *Carry On Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics*, p-121.
difficulty was the risk of spoiling a good reputation. Though the eighteenth century lots of women had joined “Grub Street”- a term used to describe a world of London-based hacks who scrapped a living by writing for low-grade publishers- and therefore, increased the risk that women with literary ambitions would be judged in the same way as the female authors who churned out “bawdy romances” or wrote or the scandal sheets. A woman’s reputation was so important that female authors were judged by both critics and the public as much on how respectable they were as they wrote. Whether or not they were writers, women were expected to live a modest and reserved life. Relatively new ideas about gender difference meant that women were now seen as special creatures’ whose natural area of expertise was the home. Women who flexed their intellectual muscles by writing books that dealt with ideas or political themes rather than charming heroines and romantic intrigue were seen as a dangerous threat to the status quo.

Like many middle-class women, Jane Austen choose to balance her love of writing and the need to stick to moral codes by remaining anonymous throughout her career as an author. It was only just after she died that her name was made public. She also stayed in line with convention by writing about safe subjects. Her stories focused on domestic and emotional matters: family, love and marriage, and her plots generally centered on young female characters learning eventually how to be better people. Although Jane Austen used her talent in an extremely modest manner by modern standards, yet the point is that she ignored the prejudices against female authors and started to write. As an unmarried woman, she particularly enjoyed the chance to earn her own
money—with careers closed to them; women in her position normally had to rely on male relatives or financial support.

Although Jane Austen wrote in the way that society expected her to work, which was admired for its wit and intelligence, greatly improved the reputation of female writers. Her realistic characters and social commentary also helped lay the foundation for the modern novel. In fact, her heroines are far from feminists, yet they point towards the future by being lively and independent. They also, unlike many female characters in fiction at the time, correct errors of judgment through their own experience rather than being taught to do so by men. In *Pride and Prejudice* Darcy has much to lean from Elizabeth as she does from him.

*Pride and Prejudice* has delighted readers since its publication with the story of the witty Elizabeth Bennet and her relationship with the aristocratic Fitzwilliam Darcy. This novel is a humorous portrayal of the social atmosphere of late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century of England, and it is primarily concerned with courtship rituals of the English gentry. The novel is much more than a comedic love affair, however, through Austen’s subtle and ironic style, it addresses economic, political, feminist, sociological and philosophical themes, inspiring a great deal of diverse critical commentary on the meaning of the work.

Austen’s novel is principally concerned with the social fabric of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century England, a patriarchal society in which men held the economic and social power. In an often satirical portrait of the men and women attempting to gain a livelihood, Austen subtly and ironically points out faults in the system, raising questions about the values of
English society and the power structure of the country. The novel contains many elements of social realism and it focuses on the merging of the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy during the era of the Napoleonic wars and at the beginning of the industrial revolution. This novel is also engaged in an ideological debate that drives its plot and defines the essence of its main character. Interested in the balance between pragmatism, or the necessity of securing a marriage and idealism, particularly Elizabeth’s romanticism and individualism, Austen dramatizes her heroines struggle to find a place within the conservative social institution of marriage. The precise nature of this balance is not necessarily clear, and despite what seems to be a happy marriage, it may not be entirely possible to reconcile Elizabeth’s independence and naturalness, the novel seems to work towards an ideological balance and an alteration in the fundamental aspects of these characters that will lead to a reconciliation of the themes that they represent.

If judged from a feminist perspective, it shows female oppression, portrayal of the patriarchal society of the time, and its treatment of the possibility, fantasy, and reality of female power. This novel may be envisioned as a triumphant fantasy of female autonomy. However, Austen’s exclusion of Mrs. Bennet from the social world reveals a persistent subjugation of women throughout the novel.

Similarly, Bronte sisters created several novels, written, at first, in secret, and published under fictitious names. Each sister choose the name of a man and passed themselves as brothers when they offered their books up to book publishers. In Victorian times, female writers were seen as less competent than male writers. The
Bronte sisters also hoped to preserve their privacy by using pen names.

The novels of the Bronte sisters centre on the difficulties faced by women due to the social expectations and mores of Victorian England. Most of these novels can be seen as early expressions of feminism where the protagonist struggle to gain independence and self reliance. The characters who are unable to stand up for themselves, or to gain some modicum of strength suffer greatly and are held up as models of failure and depicted with pity. *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte is a complex and disturbing tale of desire, vengeance, and dysfunctional family relationship set in the English moors. It is primarily a commentary on the social structure of nineteenth century England. Through the story, Bronte puts forth a feminist critique of Victorian society.

In the same way, Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* is an orphan’s struggle to gain economic stability and respect in a time when personal freedom and self-reliance was difficult for women. These three literary trio of Victorian age, are important not only for being gifted writers, but for the themes they explored in their works. Their main characters are strong, intelligent women who stood up for themselves in a time when women were supposed to be subservient drones, ruled by male dominated Victorian society. They also explored the de-humanization of poverty and the threat of poverty for women without significant male attachments and the socio-economic status they could provide. Thus, life, in early Victorian period, was a brutal place for an un-attached female.
So, nineteenth century England was a time of strict societal structure. Women, in this time period were expected to be polite, meek and modest. One would understand why it would be difficult for a female author to operate under such circumstances. They have more than a man to overcome, if they are going to express themselves in this male dominated society. Though Jane Austin, Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Virginia Woolf and so on have been included in the traditional literary canon, yet, they are marginalized because they were not allowed most of the time during their literary career to voice their real problems and feelings.

So far as theatre and playwriting is concerned, it is difficult to find off hand a really well known woman playwright in the twentieth century. Although eminent women like Doris Lessing and Lillian Hellman have written plays, yet they are known by their novels and not for their plays.

Therefore, a brief survey of the evolution and growth of modern British women theatre would be in place. Since women have by now come to the centre stage, fully bent on doing their self-assertion, the study of British women drama would be a step towards understanding the thematic concerns underpinning their writings. The following chapter would infact be the study of New Woman whose stereotyped opposite has been fully well looked at in this chapter.