

**Feminism in Literature: Male v/s Female Writers**

**Parul Kakkar**

Rajdhani College

Delhi University, Delhi, India

E-mail: [parul.k1994@gmail.com](mailto:parul.k1994@gmail.com)

**ABSTRACT**

*The traditional age old patriarchal texture of the society across all the nations has subdued half of the population, ironically called the fair sex and better half, merely for they possess less physical strength. Most of the literature irrespective of the language written also stands partial and unjust. It moved without any sympathy or emotions until pen was held by this weaker sex. Taking into consideration the literature written by the females, the paper scrutinizes the ideas of **eco-feminism**, **ethnomusicology** and trope of **rape** through the comparative study of awakening and the position of women, in conformation to the **anti-feminist** patriarchal structure, leading towards **marginal existence** as presented by males in their letters.*

**Key Words:** *Feminism, eco-feminism, ethnomusicology, anti-feminist, marginal existence, male writers and female writers.*

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**Introduction**

In spite of its entire blooming prosperity, every criterion and all the paradigms adopted for equality, our new global scenario still persists and posits with a split into two bigger and wider halves merely on the basis of gender. The verbally honored and loved fair sex is cursed to survive as a secondary citizen over all the geographical and political boundaries demarked on cosmopolitan level. Whatever achievements regarding their rights are highlighted with

exaggeration, are because She herself harvested courage, talent and ability to express. From the era of Geoffrey Chaucer to the contemporary period, women have been the prominent figure of every genre of each language of the globe, but with the arrival of female pens, the women folk have got the true mirror to reflect their pains, pleasures and joys. This paper is interested in microscoping the question of 'justice' specifically as it unfolds the deep mental agonies of women as represented by both male and female writers – taking on board *The Color Purple* (1982) and *Clarissa* (1748).

Women writers seem to be confined to a sub-culture in relation to the “main stream” i.e. the male literary tradition, as suggested by Elaine Showalter as they exhibit distinctive characteristics focusing more on the transition of the political scenario and demand for uprooting patriarchy in this structure (Gilbert and Gubar 372). Feminist readings seem to unveil the agonies of oppression, subjugation, privilege woman solidarity, interrogate family and motherhood and subvert the heterosexual love. Notably, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* posits the unique voice of her protagonist Celie, a “poor, ugly, uneducated [black girl]...[from] rural Georgia” (Mcfadden 139), poised on the edge of adolescence, after a childhood of loss and deprivation. Through her letters, she gives the readers an insight into her traumatized and shame ridden self. These letters bring about a sense of self-actualization, such that Celie questions the morality and brutality of Rape. In consideration of such feminine novels the feminist Deborah Silverton Rosenfelt in *Feminism, 'Post Feminism', and Contemporary Women's Fiction* (1991) has very aptly remarked, “Feminist novels...narrate a mythic progress from oppression, suffering, and victimization through various stages of awakening consciousness to active resistance, and finally, to some form of victory, transformation, or transcendence of despair”. “Their characteristic tone,” she continues, “compounds rage at women's oppression and revolutionary optimism about the possibility for change” (Johnson). In contradiction to Celie's awakening, the protagonist of Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel *Clarissa* being subject to the same sexual violence maintains the status quo, as she continues being a suffering woman in the male dominated social structure.

The trope of Rape, which implicitly underpins the patriarchal ideology, is not only a “male prerogative, but man's basic weapon of force against woman, the principle agent of his will and her fear” (Brownmiller 14), which instigates the ostracization of women from the power dynamics, in the periphery of so called civilized world. Many feminist writers have peeled

off the streak of the mental and physical victimization and torture in their master pieces, highlighting the barbarity and violence inflicted on their bodies, “There is no difference between being raped/ and being pushed down a flight of cement steps/ except that the wounds also bleed inside.” (Rape Poem 279). Furthermore, the pseudo ideology injected by the patriarchy denies self- expression to the victim i.e., repression and physical subjugation silences the voice of the female-prey, such that she remains deformed like the “Chinese feet” (Nightingale 311), who fosters the appeasement of the males as well as the compradors of patriarchy viz., the other mentally enslaved females, which in turn prevents rebellion. The protagonist of *The Color Purple* like Philomela in Ovid’s ‘Metamorphoses’ whose tongue was cut off with the “merciless blade” (Ovid 327) of her ravisher, is subjected to similar sexual assault and rape both by her step-father and husband Albert and proclaims it only to the illusory entity ‘God’, such that she internalizes the guilt and the blame shifts onto her, as her victimizer threatens “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy.” (Walker 3) which in direct contrast to the strong headed woman Sofia who can’t stand anyone disrespecting her and possesses the idea of self-worth, being a female in the male-dominated society “I don’t fight Sofia battle” (Walker 78).

Additionally, the “maintenance of chastity” and “virtue” (Lee 43) by the feminine gender has been posited of major importance by the male feminist writers and theorists, as a matter of fact that the female body is the repository of honor, or in the terminology of Sigmund Freud “female genitals” are symbolic of “jewelry box” (Decker 135), that must be saved from being robbed off. For instance, in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* Vicario brothers under the patriarchal illusion of re-gaining the honor and virtue, by killing the ravisher of their sister’s virginity very proudly claim “We killed him [Santiago Nasar] openly... but we’re innocent” (Marquez 25). This classical conception of virtue, as revealed in Latin terminology is definitively gendered male, as “manliness” and thus in *Clarissa*, Lovelace’s proclamation of the protagonist that “she is virtue itself” (Richardson Vol. 6 Letter 42), further reveals the patriarchal attitude of the author, Samuel Richardson. Here, the event of rape instead of focusing on the debilitated psyche of the victim, describes the virtue of virginity as a valuable commodity such that both the victim and the victimizer refer to it as an act of robbery of honor. Surprisingly, not only Clarissa but her rapist and lover Lovelace also argues that he “ought to be acquitted of everything but a common theft, a private larceny” (Richardson Vol. 9 Letter 41). Thus unveiling the sympathetic attitude of Samuel Richardson towards rape in *Clarissa*, Joy Kyunghae Lee aptly quotes, “The virginal female body becomes ‘the locus and

refuge' (McKeon 158) of an honor and virtue that are being hotly contested, a 'token of male honour for the commercial classes' (Todd 18) as well as the patriarchal family" (45).

At times, even when Clarissa Harlowe's physical beauty is described by Richardson in *Clarissa*; she is portrayed as an "aesthetic abstraction" or an epitome of chastity and not as a "sexual being" (Lee 43), as her feminine body acts merely as a cipher, which attains meaning when it is "impregnated with value and exchanged within the patriarchal economy" (Lee 39). In consideration of the production of such "docile bodies" which are not biologically, but socially constructed feminine through their appearances and virtues, Sandra Lee Bartky very aptly quotes, "Woman's space is not a field in which her bodily internationality can be freely realized but an enclosure in which she feels herself positioned and by which she is confined" (29). Thus, Robert Lovelace, the ravisher of the protagonist whose "self" in the symbolic order is entirely subsumed in her chastity recognizes this 'virtue' as a source of her resistance, which renders her "impenetrable", as he expresses himself, "Oh, virtue, virtue!... What art thou, that acting in the breast of a feeble woman, canst strike so much awe into a spirit so intrepid!" (Richardson Vol. 4 Letter 33). Furthermore, Clarissa's virtue as a commodity is exchanged for its own wealth in accordance to her marriage plan with Solmes by the Harlowe family, which would not only provide her suitor with a financial gain, but would also ensure the continuance of his estate, as pronounced in the protagonist's own words, "I am but a cipher, to give him significance, and myself pain." Thus, Clarissa as the "virginal woman... is pure exchange value. She is nothing but the possibility, the place, the sign of relations among men" (Irigaray 186), as projected by the male pro-feminist in his epistolary novel. Additionally, the stifling position of the 'fair sex' in the male-dominated society, other than just being an instrument of alliance between families is highlighted by the poetess Marge Piercy, "Now you legislate mineral rights in a woman/ You lay claim to her pastures for grazing, / Field for growing babies like iceberg/ Lettuce." (Right to Life 281). The feminist Poetess, not only emphasizes the selfishness of the male gender who visualizes women as a mechanism for producing babies, but also on the hegemonically suppressed gender used as 'fields' to be lustfully consumed by them, which induces sexual gratification. Somewhere, Poetess hints that female body is used by males for sexual gratification and then seeds are sown for the new babies.

In antithesis to Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, Alice Walker observes the universalized hetero-normative relationship in the image of the colonized and the colonizer, i.e. she

visualizes the mechanical aspect of the marital relationship between the protagonist and her husband Albert, “Never ask me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep” (Walker 74). This oppressiveness and inequality in the heterosexual relationship is further observed when Celie is appropriated to the connotation of a “bird” (Walker 229), i.e. a sub-human devoid of intellect and rationality. A similar echo of enslavement is also heard in the novel *Jane Eyre* by a female author, when the patriarch Mr. Rochester demeans the protagonist by calling her “My pet lamb” (Bronte 190), thereby enforcing his control and mastery over her. Additionally, in contrast to Richardson’s *Clarissa* who conforms to the masculine code of ethics even after the sexual assault, the protagonist of *The Color Purple* infuses into a more holistic and parental homosexual relationship with Shug Avery. This lesbian relationship assimilates intimacy, companionship and compassion, an alternative to unemotional heterosexual relation in the symbolic order, as Adrienne Rich states, “Lesbian existence suggests both the fact of historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence” (121). Thus, favoring of “Lesbian existence” by Walker becomes a harsh attack on the Masculine rights, as it appropriates ‘women’ as a class possessing sole right over their bodies.

In consistence to these rights, the lesbian relationship as perceived by the black author provokes the re-building of the destroyed psyche of the protagonist Celie through ethnomusicology, who has internalized the feeling of otherness and worthlessness in the male- dominated societal structure. Hence, the dedication of the song pronounced as “Miss Celie’s song” (Walker 70) by the singer Shug Avery, regenerates the sense of worth and provokes Celie in building an identity of her own. Additionally, singing for Shug also proves empowering and enables her to learn about her real life, as this music strengthens her to address the hardships and brutalities imposed on her through sexual organs.

Furthermore, feminine writers themselves absconding by the patriarchal structure, have personally experienced pain and trauma of marginalization, subjugation and repression being the “second sex”, they too witnessed themselves as a mere object of exchange between men. Being viewed as atomistic in the male-dominated society, these writers have evidently portrayed out this passiveness in terms of nature, whose passiveness as a commodity is exploited and consumed by the ‘Man’, in consistence with the term ‘Eco-feminism’ coined by Francoise d’Eaubonne . For instance, Celie bearing the sexual and physical violence in her marital life pronounces, “I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, You a tree” (Walker

23). Corresponding to Alice Walker, Virginia Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway* reveals the patriarchal ideology, as the suitor of Elizabeth Dalloway in his stream of consciousness pronounces the thoughts, “She was like a poplar, she was like a river, she was like a hyacinth” (Woolf 152).

The power of the ‘curse’ available to the women in the novels by the female writers inculcates the harnessing of her inner energy and language, as she is able to assert her presence in the symbolic order. This power traces its origins from Classical Greek Mythology, where Philomela curses her ravisher - “If those who dwell on high see these things, may, if there are any Gods at all, if all things have not perished with me, sooner or later you shall pay dearly for this deed” (Ovid 327). Next, this potential is also witnessed in Celie, the marginalized and suppressed protagonist of *The Color Purple* who curses her oppressor being aware of the situation, “I curse you, I say... I say, Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble” (Walker 187). However, this efficacy of the curse incorporated by the female writers in their masterpieces which lead to the derivation of the identity, of the exploited fair sex, is witnessed only in the hands of the patriarch in the feminist novels by the male writers. This mode of self-expression is too snatched from the protagonist of Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*, who is cursed by her father for fulfilling her desire of a suitor by her personal choice, “...you may meet your punishment both *here* and *hereafter*, by means of the very wretch in whom you have chosen to place your wicked confidence” (Richardson Vol.3 Letter 55).

Furthermore, many intimate thoughts and feelings of the protagonists are revealed in both *Clarissa* and *The Color Purple*, as they embody the narrative technique of letters through which the entire chain of events is unveiled. However, it also gives us an insight into the phallogocentric psychology of the authors, as the letters that prove to be empowering along with a mode of self-expression for Celie, are advocated as the culprit behind Clarissa’s rape. Anna Howe to which most of Clarissa’s letters are addressed equates the “pen” with the “needle” (Richardson Vol. 9 Letter 55), suggesting that both as domestic concerns work to uphold the patriarchal economy and improves “women to suit them better to their prescribed roles” (Lee 51). In contradiction, Alice Walker portrays Celie appropriating the power of the pen or the phallus i.e. of authority in the symbolic order, to share her personal, emotional and psychological experiences with Nettie, such that the letters bridge the physical gap between both the sisters. In addition, the letters reflect a sense of self actualization in the protagonist as she documents every stage of her awareness, and destabilizes the conventions and norms

of the man's language as she charts her trajectory in the black vernacular. In accordance to the formulation of such a different kind of language the French feminist Hélène Cixous has very aptly quoted, "Women must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (875). Nonetheless, the protagonist of Richardson's novel *Clarissa* repents over her freedom of self expression and her uncensored writing, suggesting that her letters corresponding to Lovelace lead to her dishonoring, "My crime was the corresponding with him at first, when prohibited so to do by those who had a right to my obedience" (Richardson. Vol. 6 Letter 61). Thus, as projected by the male feminist writer Clarissa's exemplary status, rape and death become reinforcements of the patriarchal standards.

Even proceeding towards the end of the novel, Samuel Richardson romanticizes and eroticizes Clarissa's condition within the patriarchal framework, such that her Christian death is too read as virtuous. The protagonist's reconciliation with her spiritual father, James Harlowe does not subvert or destabilize the authority of the patronym, rather connecting her death to marriage keeps the norms of chastity and the system of virtue intact, when she pronounces "As for me, never bride was so ready as I am. My wedding garments are brought" (Richardson Vol. 8 Letter 62). However in contradiction to Clarissa, a radical transformation is witnessed in Celie, the protagonist of the novel by a female author, as she detracts in conforming to the masculine code of ethics. Being subject to the violence and brutality of rape, instead of maintaining the status quo like Clarissa, Celie questions the morality of the assault as she acquires a sense of identity and regains consciousness. Her rebellion and realization is pertinent in her letters, though penned in black vernacular as she stops addressing them particularly to God, the masculine tyrant and instead super scribes them as "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God" (Walker 259), gaining a feeling of being equivalent to her oppressor. Unlike Clarissa in Samuel Richardson's novel, Celie by the end is witnessed as a subject as she asserts her identity in the male-dominated structure, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here" (Walker 187), which is subsequently also witnessed in Squeak after the awakening of radical ideas after repeated Rape as she professes her aspiration "When I was Mary Agnes I could sing in public" (Walker 183), as she gains a sense of identity. Further, she also proclaims her pain and frustration caused by the intrusion of the masculine gender into her and Shug Avery's imaginatively utopian feminized space, by

authoring a note to her lesbian counterpart, “Shut up” (Walker 226), after being hurt with Shug’s indulgence in heterosexual love making, with Germaine . Like the ‘pen’ for a male, ‘needle’ proves to be empowering for Celie as she stitches all the disparate patches together, i.e. adopts the role of a stem stress to earn a living stitching pants and launches an enterprise ‘Folkspants Unlimited’. In other words, the protagonist as Sylvia Plath exclaims in her poem *Mirror* “Searching my reaches for what she really is” (23) converts her deprived life into a speculum i.e. a lake with depth which enables her to look into herself and move beyond the imaginary stage. (The imaginary realm is that of the young child at the pre-linguistic, pre-Oedipal stage. The self is not yet distinguished from what is other than self, and the body’s sense of being separate from the rest of the world is not yet established, as described by Jacques Lacan. Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory*, Manchester University Press, 2014, p 124)

Rebellion against the patriarchal order by Celie, is also re-echoed in Draupati’s exclamation after the violent and brutal physical assault as she walks towards her ravisher, Senanayak with her “two mangled breasts” pronouncing “What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?” (Devi 309), thus challenging the masculinity and superiority of man over the feminine gender, suppressed by the social constraints.

Hence, an intensive exploration of the fictions penned by male and female authors separately makes it apparent that in spite of multiple similarities, the spirit and souls too have their distinguished gender as designed for female protagonists. Male authors have squeezed their entire emotions to color all the sufferings and pangs of their fair sex protagonists or characters, and they must deserve appreciation for the same, but the picture of female sufferings remains lifeless with their male brushes. The minutest feelings, stung hearts and brutalities imposed on females by patriarchal convention are mirrored from word to word and pages to pages in that literary scenario which is depicted by female hands only. As a matter of fact, any story seasoned with sympathy or even empathy can’t be so appealing and arousing as pictured by the sufferer itself, therefore, for a male writer it’s not exactly easy to depict female pains.

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#### **About the Contributor:**

Parul Kakkar (1994) completed B.A. (Honours) from Ram Lal Anand College, Delhi University. She is pursuing her M.A. in English from Rajdhani College, Delhi University. She resides at G-248, Nanak Pura, Moti Bagh-II, New Delhi—110021 and can be contacted at [parul.k1994@gmail.com](mailto:parul.k1994@gmail.com).