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Representation of Women's Identity and Agency in Victorian and Modern English Novels

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Abstract

This research paper analyzes the notion of identity and agency of women in Victorian and Modern English novels and will focus on the drastic change in the literature depictions of women, in both periods. The literature of the Victorian era, being a product of patriarchal ideology and severe social norms, mostly portrays women as morally perfect but socially constrained personalities, whose identity is determined by life in the family, marriage, and motherhood, but their agency is restricted, indirect and manifests itself through endurance of hardship and restraint of virtue. But authors like Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot bring out the early forms of resistance and self-consciousness that hints to the development of feminist consciousness within the limiting social structures. Modern English novels inspired by feminist thinking and modernist narrative methods, in turn, lead to women as psychologically complex and independent people with fluid and evolving identities that are created through inner consciousness, memory, and subjective experience. In such writings as those by Virginia Woolf or Doris Lessing, female agency is stressed as both active, reflective, and transformative so that women can challenge the norms of society and reinvent themselves beyond the constraints of patriarchy. In a comparative feminist literary study, this paper illustrates that the transformation of the Victorian to the modern fiction is an extension of the cultural and ideological change between enforced identity as outward and as internally constructed self as an inward identity and agency through the use of literature to explore and redefine the identity and agency of women.

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1. Introduction

The image of women identity and agency in English literature has been changing throughout the centuries marked by strong social, cultural, historical and ideological changes that influenced gender relations over the centuries. Literature is not an inactive image of the society but it actively takes part in the process of creating, supporting and occasionally questioning the established ideas about gender roles, identity construction and the force structure. It is in this wider context that English novels of various historical periods can be considered as valuable cultural texts which can be used to understand how the conceptualization of the notion of womanhood is formed and transformed throughout history. The Victorian and modern English novels, especially, are two different narrative traditions, which accentuate a gradual, but strong change in the perception, representation, and understanding of women by the literary discourse. This shift becomes crucial to study how literature, on the one hand, endorses and on the other challenges the ideologies of patriarchy, on the other hand, discloses the alteration of the socio-cultural status of women throughout centuries.

Women in Victorian fiction are often discussed in a strict patriarchal system which prioritizes domesticity, moral purity, obedience, self-sacrifice, and emotional restraint as the most desirable feminine virtues. They are mostly defined by their

connection with men and the scope of their life is under the acceptable social norms of a daughter, a wife, a mother, or a caregiver, rather than an individuality or personal drive. Women are usually portrayed as morally superior but socially passive characters whose role is to maintain family values, to allow the social harmony and to enforce ethics in the household realm. Such literary representation is very much reflective of the dominant social ideology of the nineteenth century where women had limited independence in legal systems, their movement had to be checked by the culture and their intellectual and economic opportunities were suppressed to a great extent. Because of this, Victorian fiction tends to support the notion of womanhood as selfless obedience instead of self-directed personality, locating women within strictly set limits of what is acceptable and what is not: acceptable behavior and acceptable conduct. Nevertheless, even in the literature of the Victorian era, it is possible to trace some of the first instances of resistance, personalism and psychological complexity, which hints at the fact this was not a thoroughly non-feminist era in the literature. The novels of Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, as well as other writers, build sophisticated women characters, people who quietly protest against the established norms and demand intellectual, emotional, and moral independence in the limiting situations. In novels like *Jane Eyre* and *Middlemarch*, characters show the ultimate inner struggle, the increased self-perception and the doubtful attitude to marriage, education, and the wider social restrictions that they had to be subjected to as women. These stories reveal the conflict between personal desire and social norm, in which we can see how women struggle to find freedom in a patriarchal society. Although there are these progressive narrativist details, the general organization of the Victorian society and morality still leaves the full enactment of female agency suppressed and in most cases, it requires the women characters to adapt or compromise instead of entirely escaping the established norms.

On the contrary, the English novels of modern times are the turning point in the representation of women, their identity formation, and their voice in the narrative. In the wake of feminist theory, psychoanalytic thinking, modernist experimentation and the impact of major socio-economic shifts, contemporary writers like Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing depict women in complex, fragmented, self-reflective and rich and multi-faceted inner lives that form the focus of narrative exploration. It is not the social role or moral expectations that determine them but rather the inner consciousness, lived experience, memory, and trauma and existential questioning that can attest to the complexity of contemporary existence. In the contemporary literature, much of the stress is put on the fluidity and instability of identity, in which the women go through emotional and psychological torment trying to balance personal freedom and societal expectations, traditional roles, and internal conflict. The female subjectivity can be explored in more depth because women are no longer voiceless objects but the active thinker, and the inner voices of these women determine the text itself.

In this way, the Victorian to the modern fiction shows a substantial and relevant change of the outward limited womanhood into the inward created and formed identity wherein the women slowly become less the passive figures subjected to the social conventions and more the active agents of the systems creating their own stories and lives. This

transformation points to the understanding of women as increasingly independent subjects of experience, thought, emotion, and creativity not just objects of representation in the literary discussion. It also represents the larger historical experience of feminist awareness whereby literature is a formidable tool of challenging, reworking, and unpacking the meaning of gender, identity, and agency in society. The English literature, through this development, is found not only to record social transformation but is also making significant contributions toward altering the cultural interpretations of what it is to be a woman in various historical and ideological settings.

2. Representation of Women's Identity in Victorian and Modern English Novels

The subject of women identity in Victorian and Modern English novels demonstrates a tremendous and extensive change in the formulation, perception, and appreciation of the nature of female subjectivity in the literary discourse that is not only a change of the style of narration but also profound shifts in ideology throughout the course of history. The Victorian literature, which is founded on strict social stratification, moral conservatism, and patriarchal ideology largely characterizes women in terms of the externally imposed roles, and not in terms of their internal individualities or continuously changing subjectivities, whilst modern English novels decisively shift the emphasis of the phenomenon of socially imposed identities to self-created and ever-shifting subjectivities. This change is not a purely literary event, but a mirror of more general historical events, such as the emergence of feminist movements, greater access to female education, more involvement with female in societal and intellectual spheres, and the shifting cultural understanding of the nature of being a woman both in literature and society, a combination of which is ultimately redefining the concept of what it means to be a woman. Consequently, the Victorian to the modern fiction signifies a complicated yet effective reworking of female identity as a rigid social group to a moving and changing practice structured by the consciousness, experience, and self-knowledge.

Women are closely linked with domesticity, moral virtue, emotional restraint, and relation existence in Victorian novels creating a highly regulated system where women characters have to display such concepts of femininity as purity, patience, obedience, and self-sacrifice. The aspect of these characters is that they are usually idealized in terms of morality, whose major aim is to maintain family life, help maintain emotional stability in the home, and preserve the moral framework of the society, yet their personality is not as important as the societal duties imposed on them. They are not independent and self-generated identities, but rather defined in terms of male figures, fathers, husbands, brothers, or lovers, which drives the patriarchal belief that women are not subjects at all, but relational dependents. Although the Victorian heroines prove to be intelligent, emotionally strong, or even morally powerful, these qualities are, in many cases, restricted by the prevailing social norms that dictate that marriage, respectability, and domestic stability are more important than personal ambition, intellectual freedom, or involvement in society. This trend of depiction indicates the larger ideology of the nineteenth century that strictly separates the spheres of the public and the private with women placed in the domain of domesticity and men as the

agents of intellectual, political, and economic power. Nevertheless, the Victorian fiction is also marked with a great amount of resistance, self-awareness and even feminist consciousness, which refuse to undermine these limiting identity constructs, although they do not necessarily destroy them entirely. The protagonist of *Jane Eyre*, which is a novel authored by Charlotte Brontë, in the novel, provides her sense of emotional parity, moral autonomy, and personal pride, thus confronting the idea of feminine passivity and insubordination that prevailed in Victorian gender culture. Likewise, George Eliot has introduced women characters of a very intellectual and psychological complexity like Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* who is in a fierce conflict between her spiritual and intellectual ambitions inside and the repressions that society, marriage, and culture set on her as an external force. Though these characters come to work within limiting social parameters and at many times must negotiate or compromise their own wants, they can be considered a pivotal moment in the history of female identity in literary works as women are now able to critically examine the constraints they were previously bound to and find ways to define themselves, intellectually develop, and express their emotions in restricted settings. This implies that, on the one hand Victorian literature is quite restrictive, but on the other hand it at the same time has planted the seed of feminist awareness and identity formation.

The role of women identity in the current English novel approaches a radical and transformative reorganization, and the roles of women move beyond socialized, socially determined places to fluid, psychological and existential conceptions of self that place focus more on the internal experience than the external definition. Authors like Virginia Woolf actively abandon the conventional linear narrative forms in favor of experimental, post-modern literary devices like stream of consciousness to consider the fractured, stratified, and constantly changing interior experiences of women, and thus identity is not something fixed. Novels like *The Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* introduce the concept of female identity as a part of the memory and perception and of time and subjective experience, thus it is not something static but rather a constant process influenced by thoughts and feelings and engagement with the world around them. This storytelling method is of monumental importance to the literary space granted to women interiority in which their consciousness is now the focus of representation instead of their exterior roles in social relationships.

In the same fashion, Doris Lessing continues to elaborate on the portrayal of the female identity through the depiction of female characters who are very active in questioning social norms, ideological boundaries, and psychological constraints that are imposed by the society and internalized belief systems. The women portrayed in books like *The Golden Notebook* are represented as fractured and disjointed in trying to incorporate several aspects of identity, such as political consciousness, emotional passion, intellectual aspirations, and personal recollection that are in a continuous conflict with each other. This fragmentation is not introduced as a weakness or deficiency but is also a truthful and realistic display of the current world of existence where identity is presented as inseparably ambiguous, contradictory, and constantly changing under the forces of external pressure and internal struggle. In this description, the multiplicity of female experience is confirmed in modern literature, as well

as the rejection of simple and single-identity models which are common to earlier literary traditions.

In such a way, the Victorian to modern literature can be viewed as the radical change in terms of the constructing women identity that cease being the externally imposed and defined by the patriarchal ideas to the ones that are created on the inside and reflect back on themselves with fluidity and autonomy. Whereas the Victorian novels are known to stabilize identity through moral, domestic and relational systems, the modern novels actively destabilize and recreate identity in a fragmented, multi faceted and shifting form through time and experience. Such development represents the increased awareness of women not only as a symbolic figure or a moral ideal, but a subject that is active and conscious and can determine itself through thinking, experience, and desire, which will mark an important turning point in literary presentation as well as cultural perception of gender identity.

3. Representation of Women's Agency in Victorian and Modern English Novels

The way, in which women agency has been represented in the Victorian and English Modern novels, represents one of the most dramatic and radical changes in the history of literature, particularly in terms of changing the perceptions of gender, power dynamics, and personal subjectivity. In feminist and literary discourses, agency is understood as the ability of women to make their own choices, to assume control over their life and to impose their will in the social, emotional, moral and intellectual arenas, which makes them not a tool of specific influences but a participant in the construction of their own life. In Victorian fiction though, this agency is very often severely limited by strict patriarchal organization which governs the actions of women, restricts their freedom and establishes the acceptable boundaries of female action within a narrow system of morality and culture. Conversely, contemporary English fiction literature broadens and remodels the idea of female agency considerably by introducing women as independent, self-reflective figures who are active participants, challenges, and even more frequently re-creators of the social, ideological and psychological frames that attempt to enclose them, hence a turning point of restriction to liberation in the literary representation.

Women agency in Victorian novels is usually very indirect, subtle and strictly controlled by the prevailing moral and social norms, i.e. female characters are seldom given complete independence and free freedom of action in determining their fate. The necessity of maintaining respectability, defending family honor, and living up to the standards of emotional suppression, chastity, and self-sacrifice are often imposed on them, and all these elements are the cornerstones of Victorian femininity. Their attempts to do so are usually limited to socially approved scope of action, whether in the form of marriage, household duty or moral obligation, and never to the more radical structural or systemic reform. Consequently, agency in Victorian literature is frequently manifested in emotive survival, elastic misery, morality and muted kinds of resistance as opposed to open rebellion and radical change, which was the greater ideology of the nineteenth century that depicted women as morally potent and yet socially and economically dependent creatures whose main task was to ensure the stability of the domestic environment.

Nevertheless, even in spite of these restrictions, the early manifestations of female agency are present in Victorian fiction as well and deeply significant and meaningful statements on the issues of female agency that ambiguously resist the patriarchal norms and hint at the appearance of the independent female consciousness in the confining circumstances. The main heroine of Charlotte Brontë, especially in *Jane Eyre*, demonstrates that she has a strong feeling of moral and emotional independence when she refuses to lower her dignity, her self-respect, and inner values even in terms of love, emotional attachment and social norms, which can be regarded as a strong break with the models of femininity that were passive. Likewise, George Eliot introduces women who are intellectually profound, ethically rational, and emotionally multidimensional as in such characters as Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* who is active in introspection and who is interested in finding purpose beyond the ordinary roles of wifehood. Even though these characters eventually have to work within the parameters of the Victorian social systems and have to bargain, trade off, or reevaluate their ambitions, they still, however, symbolize a very important transitional phase of female agency formation in literature when women started to challenge the traditional roles and seek the opportunities of self-determination within restricted yet important dimensions.

The agency of women in current English novels is much more explicit, multidimensional and transformative, as it is the impact of the feminist theory, psychological investigations, and modernist experimentation with narrative that are all reshaping the literary representation of female subjectivity. Authors like Virginia Woolf radically restructure the form of narrative through their primary focus on female consciousness and interior experience in turning women into active participants in creating meaning, identity and narrative reality. Woolf provides female characters with a space to express their thoughts, feelings, memories, and contradictions through innovative methods like stream of consciousness when there is no outside narrative control and judgment, which opens the literary space of female subjectivity and autonomy to a great extent. It is a significant progress in the idea of agency because women are not put as passive objects of observation but rather as subjects and actively construct their inner and narrative worlds.

Equally, Doris Lessing not only advances the image of the female agency, but also, complicates it, through the depiction of women as profoundly psychological, politically conscious, and existentially active individuals who constantly challenge the conventional demands about marriage, motherhood, sexuality, and freedom of thought. Female characters frequently feel fragmented, controversial, and tense in attempts to combine various elements of the different identities such as emotional desire, ideologically based belief, and intellectual ambition, in society that enforces more restrictive norms and expectation. Contrary to Victorian heroines who typically find their way out through adhering to conventionality or moral compromise, the female protagonists of today often undergo unresolved conflict, which is much more indicative of real human experience and its chaotic and shifting aspects than literary closure or ethical affirmation. This kind of agency is never necessarily linear, stable or victorious but it is richly authentic in the way it describes the process of women negotiating identity in complicated and often conflicting systems.

Therefore, the Victorian to the modern literature illustrates

the redefinition of the fundamental implication of women agency on a larger scale, beyond the limitation of moral and domestic choice toward the broadening of psychological, existential and intellectual freedom in which women can express themselves more, and express greater autonomy. Victorian novels are inclined to restrict agency in highly delimited social structures supporting stability, respectability, and moral order, modern novels stress self definition, resistance and change as an important part of female experience. This is a change that underscores the increased awareness of women as active subjects of their lives and not as passive agents formed by patriarchal discourses, which is a significant development in the depiction of gender, power, and identity in literature over time and culture.

4. Evolution of Feminist Consciousness in Victorian and Modern English Novels

The history of the development of the feminist consciousness in the Victorian and Modern English novels is a gradual yet profoundly important and transformative process in the history of literature, as it is a steady change in the approach of literature to the issues of gender, identity formation, social hierarchy, and power relations in literature at different periods of time. The term feminist consciousness can be broadly defined as a growing awareness of gender-based inequity and the ideological, cultural, and institutional procedures that perpetuate the patriarchal authority and at the same time articulates the wish to oppose, challenge, and resist such constraints to redefine the role of women in the society. This consciousness does not appear abruptly or in its full-fledged form in the context of English literature; instead, it is a slow, gradual process that gradually manifests itself through literary periods, with traces of a very subtle and indirect kind of resistance in the novels of the Victorian era and becoming more obvious, more active, and self-awarely feminist voice in the novels of the modern era. This is a lengthy evolution that has been more closely linked to the more general historical and social trends including reforms in education of women, the suffrage movement, a rise in political awareness, industrial and economic processes and changes in cultural attitudes toward gender roles, which, all in combination, led to a revision of the experience women live and how women are depicted in literature. Consequently, feminist awareness in literature does not only concentrate on the development of art only but also on the overall socio-political process of gender equality and empowerment of women.

In the Victorian literature, feminist awareness is mostly implicit, suppressed, and tightly controlled by the strict moral, social and cultural principles of the nineteenth century, which considerably restricted the space of the open criticism of the patriarchal order. Feminist writers and female characters of this era tend to act within an ideological paradigm that requires them to follow the accepted gender roles, and a straightforward criticism of gender inequality is not only socially unsafe but also narratively inhibitive. Nevertheless, even within these constraints, there are still some hidden ripples of a new feminist consciousness that can be discerned beneath the surface of Victorian fiction, especially in the work of such authors as Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, who develop intriguing female characters that, even though they conform to the societal norms of marriage, obedience, emotional dependency, and social submission, challenge them nonetheless. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane

claims her entitlement to dignity, equality and moral independence therefore, protesting against the vision of women being passive or inferior in personal and social relations. Likewise, George Eliot plays with the philosophical and emotional conflicts of women who want to find meaning, self-fulfillment, and ethical clarity outside the tunnel of domesticity and presents a more discriminating critique of Victorian gender ideology. The totality of these narrative factors points to the fact that even in the framework of the social structure that is somewhat restrictive, the Victorian literature starts to express the initial stages of feminist questioning and self-awareness that precondition the further progress.

However, in spite of such progressive and transformative aspects, feminist awareness in Victorian fiction is still very much bound up with prevailing social institutions and has to be, in many cases, resolved by female characters compromising, adapting, or returning to their moral values, instead of radical change or systemic opposition. Likewise, in the specific case of marriage, this is used as a symbolic or narrative solution, even when the heroines may be seen as defying or opposing traditional values or norms, which in turn solidifies the argument that social stability is what ultimately reigns over the idea of individual liberation. Because of this, feminist consciousness of Victorian literature may be taken as symbolic, transitional, and incomplete so as to signify a significant beginning of the acknowledgment of gender inequality, but to date it is not yet fully articulated or structurally transformative in terms of criticizing the patriarchal system. Rather, it is in a zone of conflict between the opposites of resistance and conformity, where female characters are allowed to pursue limited types of autonomy without entirely exceeding the frames of existing moral and cultural norms. This duality emphasizes how complicated the feminist consciousness of Victorians was as it challenges and supports the same structures that it tries to challenge.

Feminist consciousness is much more explicit, intellectually evolved, and ideologically involved in modern English novels as a result of modernist experimentation, psychoanalytic thought, and the increasing effect of feminist theory on the critical interpretation of literature and society. The main and original role in this change belongs to such writers as Virginia Woolf who highlighted the necessity of female subjectivity, interiority, and narrative voice in order to turn the focus of literary works not on the extrinsic social functions of people but on the intrinsic psychological realities. Writing about the inequalities of the system in publications like *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf explicitly discusses the historical inequalities that confined women to education, economic autonomy, creativity, and literary control, and holds that such systemic inhibitions have greatly contributed to the silence of women voices in literary history or the relegation of women voices to the periphery. Woolf, in her fiction as well as her essays, creates a space of women as not only characters in stories but as makers of meaning, knowledge and artistic expression and thus redefines the roots of literary representation.

Likewise, Doris Lessing again illustrates further and makes feminist consciousness deeper and more complicated by providing women with psychological complexity, political consciousness, and existential involvement, as these women constantly challenge and bargain with different strata of constriction that are imposed both by the outside world and

the innerized ideologies. The discontinuity of the female character in *The Golden Notebook* is an effective depiction of the current feminist identity when individual experience, emotional living, intellectual desire, and political consciousness collide, contradict, and can hardly be absorbed into one consistent personality. This incomplete form can be traced in the reality of modern womanhood, when identity is not any single and fixed, but is constantly disrupted by contradictory forces and changing conditions. In contrast to the earlier Victorian versions when female virtue is often idealized or women are otherwise kept within the confines of home-based stories, the complex, psychologically deep, ideologically tense representation of a female by Lessing takes feminist consciousness into a more dynamic and multidimensional model that can embrace struggle and change.

In this way, the development of feminist consciousness between Victorian and modern English novels can be viewed as a deep-seated and persistent transition of a latent form of criticism in the traditionally constructed narrative structure to an overt, conscious, and ideologically based opposition to a patriarchal system. Victorian literature presents the initial and often hesitant questioning of the gender roles within narrow narrative and social context, and modern literature broadens this questioning into a wholesome and intellectually sound critique of systematic inequality, and redefines the purpose of literature as the place of feminist philosophy, social commentary, and cultural change. This evolution proves that the feminist consciousness in English literature is not an overnight event but a gradual evolution process that advances to forceful expression which eventually transforms the image of women identity, control, and cultural relevance through time.

5. Comparative Analysis of Victorian and Modern Representations of Women

The comparative study of the Victorian and Modern representations of women in the English novels shows an extensive and systematic change in how females identity, agency, and social meaning were constructed. The literature of the Victorian period is conditioned by strict patriarchal culture and moral codes, and therefore, the concept of women is usually represented in the form of moral idealized but socially perfected women whose lives are mostly shaped by domestic concerns. Modern English novels, on the contrary, suppress most of these traditional constructs and introduce women as multi-dimensional, self-conscious, and active participants in discussions of questions of identity, freedom and psychological being. Such comparison shows not just a change in the technique of the literature and the focus of narration but a much wider change in the manner in which gender is comprehended in the historical periods.

In Victorian novels the female body is mostly created as an outer definition, according to family roles, marriage, morality, and emotional virtue. Their identities are not personal but relative such that they are usually interpreted relative to men or within the confines of the home. Although the Victorian heroines are often intelligent, ambitious or emotionally powerful, these features are often under the social pressures that emphasize obedience, respectability and sacrifice. Female characters presented by writers like Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot start to challenge such restrictions but their stories tend to be limited to the moral and social setups of the nineteenth century. This makes

Victorian expression of women both oppositional and constrained by the same.

The English novels of the modern era, in contrast, present quite the opposite scenario where women are not confined to definite social identities but are instead depicted as fluid, fractured, and changing creatures. Groups of authors like Virginia Woolf, focus on women inward thought, giving focus to the inner being and its subjective life rather than its social interaction. In other novels such as Mrs. Dalloway, identity is introduced as dynamic and multi-dimensional, which is determined by memory, perception, and time. Likewise, Doris Lessing introduces women whose roles are active and challenge the established standards of society and who are unable to come to terms with conflicting elements of their identities, such as emotional desire, intellectual ambitions and political consciousness. This change is a transition between externally imposed identity and internally constructed selfhood.

The other significant area of comparison is the agency and freedom representations. Victorian women tend to receive little agency which is manifested in a moral choice, emotional stamina or indirect opposition. Their decisions are mostly influenced by the necessity to be recognized by society and to be able to fit in the norms and norms given and in particular marriage and family. However, contemporary women are described as more psychologically and existentially agency, despite the conflict, disintegration, or insecurity in their lives. Modern novels tend to leave questions open-ended in lieu of the resolution of tensions in the narrative, which can also be seen as a response to the ambiguities of the real-world human experience.

Moreover, the ways of narration that were employed in the two eras have a notable impact on the portrayal of women. The Victorian novels are generally linear structured in nature highlighting moral resolution, as well as social order. With modern novels, however, there are more experimental methods of the novel, including stream of consciousness, fragmented narration, and shifting perspective, which reflects complexity of female experience. This is a formal innovation which enables an author such as Virginia Woolf to introduce women not in fixed characters but as consciousnesses that grow through the times and thinking.

Therefore, by the comparative analysis of the Victorian and the modern representations of women, one can observe obvious transformation of the restraining into the broadening, of the extrinsic definition to the intrinsic self-discovery, of the external into the internal representation and the subject of the representation to an agent. Although the elaborations of the Victorian literature mirror the limitations of the context under which they are created, modern literature questions and redesigns those limits and provides a more detailed and freer version of the identity and agency of women.

6. Gender Roles and Power Structures in Literary Representation

The ideology of gender roles and power structure as represented in Victorian and Modern English novels is at the heart of defining the position of women in the literary and social discourse. As a cultural product, literature does not just mirror the power structures in society, but also supports or opposes them in terms of the form of narrative, the building of characters, and the focus of the narrative. In Victorian fiction, the division of gender roles is rather strict and strictly adhered to, as men have to hold the authority, the superior

intellect, and represent the agent of the community, whereas women are mostly restricted to the sphere of household, emotional, and moral care. These structures are in turn challenged, unsteadied and reinvented in modern English novels, with more fluid and ambiguous accounts of gender identity and power relations being possible.

The dominance system has been deeply entrenched in the social system in the Victorian novels of marriage, education, law, and family system that generally tends to be more favorable to male authority and restrict female freedom. Women are also portrayed as insecure without the presence of a male figure who would provide them with financial, social, and emotional stability. Their power is indirect and even limited to inner circles even when they are smart or morally endowed. The perfect Victorian woman is supposed to possess the elements of obedience, purity and self sacrifice, which strengthen the patriarchal power by inhibit female mobility and self-expression. Within this context, literature turns into the mirror of the community where gender hierarchy is accepted and is not questioned explicitly.

Nevertheless, these power structures are also subtly criticized in the works of the Victorian literature as women who give in to conflicted characters are shown. The heroine in the works of Charlotte Brontë and Jane Eyre in particular does not want to be subdued fully as she requires equality in love and moral esteem. In the same vein, George Eliot offers women who take a critical look at their social state and demand intellectual satisfactions outside the realms of the home. Though these stories fail to entirely undermine the system of patriarchy they highlight the strains within the system and create a possibility of other forms of gender arrangements.

In contemporary English novels, gender roles are less defined, more mobile and less structured as evidenced by feminist thinking, psychoanalysis and modernist experimentation. The work of writers like Virginia Woolf is the attempt to disrupt the hierarchies, to prioritize female consciousness, the subjective experience rather than the social definition. Women in her works are deprived of a support or a secondary role and are put at the center of consciousness through which reality is perceived and constructed. Even this shift of narration is a kind of rebellion against the literary traditions of patriarchy.

Equally, Doris Lessing challenges the boundaries of gender, politics, and psychological identity and offers female characters who challenge and rebel against society. She frequently has her characters at cross purposes in terms of identity discontinuity, in which individual impulse, social duty, and ideological compulsion are in fratricidal conflict. In contrast to Victorian novels, which are more likely to resolve the issue of gender conflict by conformity, contemporary novels often do not, and the gender conflict remains quite unresolved, as the gender relations in the real life are as complicated and unstable as possible.

So, the dissection of gender roles and power structures in Victorian and modern fiction provides an interesting insight into the fact that the hierarchical structures were much more rigid than the modern, disputed and dynamic ones. Though, in most of its ways, the Victorian literature is maintaining the traditional gender hierarchies, the modern literature is actually putting them to the test and undermining them. This development proves the way literary representation is involved into more cultural dialogues about power, identity and equality, which eventually leads to the fact that the role of women in society is being redefined.

7. Conclusion

This analysis of the expression of women identity and agency during Victorian and Modern English novels brings out a radical change in the history of literature on a multi-dimensional basis. The literature of these two different eras portrays the social attitudes, ideologies and changing perception of gender roles. The Victorian novels mostly create a picture of women in a context of domesticity, moral rightness, and social reliance, but the English novels of current era broaden and deepen the portrayal of women, giving preference to the psychological and individual and independence. This shift points to the slow process of changing the traditionally patriarchal definitions of women to less restrictive and more liberated and self-determined forms of womanhood. The women in the Victorian fiction are mostly portrayed as idealized characters that are socially restricted and whose identities are constructed by the family structure, marriage and cultural norms. They typically can only act indirectly in their resistance, and in their endurance, and in their choices within the confines of their patriarchal society. Even though novelists like Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot present some complicated female characters who challenge social conventions and develop intellectual ambition, to some extent, these images are confined to the general ideological models of the nineteenth century. Consequently, the Victorian literature also brings conformity as well as implicit criticism of the patriarchal organization. Modern English novels, in contrast, are a major breakthrough of these restrictions as they introduce women as active subjects with complicated inner worlds and dynamic selves. Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing, among other writers, delve into the consciousness of women, and they emphasize on the psychological, emotional and existential aspects of women. Contemporary texts tend not to espouse linear narration, but apply experimental forms that emphasize fragmentation, subjectivity, and relativity. This enables the women characters to become not social type formations but characters under the constant processes of self-discovery and self-definition. The very idea of agency also passes through a significant change during these periods of literature. In Victorian novels, the power of agency is limited and manifests itself in acceptable social norms, in modern novels it is more explicit, analytical, and transformationary. Women no longer have to subservient roles in domestic arrangements, but are depicted as people who can challenge conventions and make independent choices, and rebel against the status quo of power. Even as new female characters find conflict or disunity, this instability is manifested as a true representation of lived experience as opposed to a character failure. Altogether, the comparison of the Victorian and Modern English novels shows the evident development of the picture of the identity and agency of women. Literature ceases to support established gender hierarchies and begins to critically engage with them and remake them. Such a transition does not just indicate changes in the literary aesthetic, but it is also related to the larger historical trends of feminist ideas and social reform. After all, the English literature is an immensely powerful tool that has tracked the intricacies of women experience over time, disputing and redefining them.

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