

Shri Harihar Prathishta's

**Govindlal Kanhaiyalal Joshi (Night)**  
**Commerce College, Latur**

A Proceedings of the National Conference on  
**Recent Trends in Literature**

Chief Editor

**Dr. Sujata Chavan**  
(I/C Principal)

Editor

**Shaikh Aref**

Asst. Professor, Dept. of English



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**Published by:**

**Wizcraft Publications and Distribution Pvt. Ltd.,**

**129/498, Vasant Vihar, Solapur - 413 001, Maharashtra, India**

**Year of Publication: 2019**

**ISBN - 978-93-86013-81-1**

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**Rs. 500/-**

**Printed at:**

**Palavi Printers,**

**129/498, Vasant Vihar, Solapur - 413 001, Maharashtra, India**

**Cover Design: Deepak Nanaware**

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### The Development of Feminism in English Literature of the 19th and 20th centuries

*Shaikb Aref Pasbamiya, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Govindlal Kamhayaal Joshi (Night) Commerce College, Latur*

The word feminism comes from French word feminism and according to the Cambridge online dictionary feminism is “the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state.”<sup>3</sup> The term ‘feminism’ itself is used to describe a cultural, political or economic movement aiming for equal rights for both women and men. Nonetheless, the terms ‘feminism’ and ‘feminist’ did not gain widespread meaning use until the 1970s when they started to be used in the public parlance more frequently. The feminist movement involves sociological and political theories concerning with gender difference issues. The movement has been here for many decades, and British women have started to fight against the oppression during mid 1850s when the first feminists started to advocate their thoughts about inequality and when the first suffragette movement emerged, since then women have started working on accomplishing their goals to have the same rights and to have the same position in society as men have. The feminist framework also indicates how problems are defined and the kinds of questions to be asked. For example, according to definition in *Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Development* written by Jane L. Parpart et al inequality results from “the need to establish unequal incentives to motivate the most talented people to do the most important jobs efficiently in society,”<sup>4</sup> other definition from the same book also says that the inequality results from “the practice of providing differential rewards to keep a less powerful working

class fragmented by gender and race.

### Brief Biographies of the Selected Authors

Each of the four writers, Charlotte Brontë, Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson, are connected to feminism and approached the topic in a slightly different way. This chapter, however, discusses their lives and mentions their best known works. Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855), a British novelist and poet, was the eldest of three Brontë sisters. When she was five years old her mother died of cancer and she and her siblings were raised by her aunt. Charlotte and her sisters were then sent to a Clergy Daughter's School to gain an education; however, the school's poor conditions permanently affected Charlotte's physical and mental development, which she afterwards depicted in *Jane Eyre*. When Charlotte returned home from school, she acted as the oldest sibling as a mother towards her sisters and brother. The family lived in a Haworth Parsonage which is also the place where the siblings started creating their fiction. The siblings created fictional worlds and began chronicle the lives and struggles of their characters. Charlotte with her brother Branwell wrote about imagined country Angria, whereas Emily and Anne wrote poems about the country of Gondal. Charlotte, nonetheless, continued her education and between 1835 and 1838 was a teacher and after that also worked as a governess. In 1846 Charlotte, Emily and Anne published a collection of their poems under pseudonyms of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. And a year later she published her masterpiece *Jane Eyre* (1847), which is inspired by the author's life and the book became an immediate success. Among her other novels are *Shirley* (1848), which concerns with the role of women in “Emma Watson at the He or She Campaign that deals with isolation and social repression of individual desire. The deaths of Branwell, Emily and Anne affected Charlotte on a great scale, nevertheless, she managed to get married despite her father's disapproval. However, in 1854 while expecting a baby she caught pneumonia and after a



lengthy illness she died the following year. Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) is considered to be one of the most renowned authors of British history. He was born in Dorchester, in a rural area of Wessex, and studied architecture and consequently became an architect, however, when he came to London in 1891 he found himself to be more interested in writing poetry and fiction. Hardy regarded himself as a poet, however, his poems were not received very well during his lifetime. After publishing *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), which was a success, he decided to pursue his literary career and give up architectural work, nonetheless, after publishing *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), and *Jude the Obscure* (1895) he received very harsh critiques which sent him back to poetry. The area of Wessex had a huge influence on him, as most of his fictional works are set there. He created a semi-fictional region of Wessex based on one of the kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon Britain. His works are influenced by Romanticism, especially William Wordsworth and Charles Dickens. Hardy was a Victorian realist and in his novels he tried to depict the social constraints on the lives of those living in Victorian England, he also criticized beliefs relating to marriage and religion, which limit people's lives and cause sadness. Hardy was married twice, however, the death of his first wife affected him tremendously and in many of his poems he is dealing with her death. Hardy himself died in January 1928 and is buried in the Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey. Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was an English writer, philosopher, critic and foremost modernist of the 20th century. At the age of six she was sexually abused by her brother and the memory of this incident became only more permanent after her mother suddenly died. As a result of that she suffered from nervous breakdowns and anxiety. In her twenties, after the death of her father, she moved to Bloomsbury and became a member of the Bloomsbury Groups. The group consisted of many influential figures; writers, intellectuals, and artists, who were united by a belief in the importance of the arts. In 1912 she

got married to Leonard Woolf, a member of the Bloomsbury Group, 15 however, she kept a romantic relationship with Vita Sackville-West. Woolf was known for her mood swings and deep depression, and she committed suicide in 1941, in her late fifties. She pioneered a new style of writing the stream of consciousness, which she applied in most of her novels. In her writings, she explores problems of personal identity and relationships, love, isolation and change. Woolf's highly acclaimed novels are *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Orlando* (1928). Nonetheless, Woolf was not only a novelist but also a feminist and she is also known for her essays, especially for *A Room of One's Own*, which is an extended essay defending women's rights. The essay also includes the very famous quote "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction."<sup>23</sup> A contemporary English writer Jeanette Winterson, born in August 1959 in Manchester, is known for her quirky and unconventional novels. She was strictly brought up by her religious mother who intended her to be a missionary, however, at the age of 16 Winterson identified herself as a lesbian and moved to London. After gaining diploma from St. Catherine's College, Oxford, she had various jobs while working on her novels. After publishing *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) the novel received high acclaim and won a Whitbread Award for the best novel. Among her other novels are *The Passion* (1987), that is inspired by her affair with her literary agent, and *Sexting the Cherry* (1989), which is considered to be very important for women as it deals with position of women in patriarchal society. In 2006 Winterson was made an officer of Order of the British Empire for her services to literature. Her novels are very popular and many of them were also adapted for television.

### Comparison Of Male And Female Writers On The Topic Of Feminism

Writing about feminism and women's attitudes was slightly different for female and male writers during the 19th



and 20th centuries. Several female writers, Charlotte Brontë was among them, were even writing under a pseudonyms because they felt intimidated to write under their real name, and as for Brontë she was using the pen 23 Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 3. 16 name Curref Bell. Women at the beginning of the 19th century were rather insecure to write explicitly about their problems in society, thus they used male pseudonyms, because men's opinions were much more respected and they also wanted to avoid the influence of prejudice of the society against female writers. Feminism at that time was not outright spoken and passed rather through literature. Literature was the primary medium to communicate ideas and thoughts about this topic, it was also one of the means of communication because literature could spread around the world when people travelled. What also influenced writers during 19th and 20th centuries was the rise of sexual freedom, which was part of the general European Enlightenment. However, because sexuality had been so little studied, it is difficult to know to what extent its ideals had spread in other countries, nevertheless, it is obvious that it has been gradual since the Middle Ages.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the 19th century and more precisely the Victorian era, from 1840s to 1900, was the time of two motifs; sexuality and subordination. The subordination is related to lack of power and political ignorance of women. In order to fight against this, feminists began to construct an ideology of their own, a new basis of thinking about relationships, sexuality and masculine power.<sup>25</sup> The Victorian era witnessed changes in thinking about women in society, concerning women's education, right to vote, marriage and sexuality. The second part of the 19th century was the time when the most radical and far-reaching change of all happened; the change of women's role in society. Number of opportunities becoming available to women in the male-dominated world increased, there were new improvements of educational and employment prospects for women, and marriage followed by motherhood was no longer seen as the

inevitable route towards securing a level of financial security. According to Greg Buzwell's essay *Daughters of decadence, a woman of the 19th century was embodiment of the New Woman*, "she was freespirted and independent, educated and uninterested in marriage and children." 26 *The New Woman* became a phenomenon, in real life she was a feminist fighting for female suffrage and in literature she was a woman who focused on her own aspirations but she also functioned as a mirror of the current society. She was no longer described as a loving wife devoted to her husband but as a dignified woman who does not have to submit to a man. However, Buzwell also claims that female characters were sometimes described either as "sexual predators or oversensitive females who cannot accept their nature as a sexual being." 27 During the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century a new literary style emerged modernism. That meant that literature was more naturalistic and the authors had more freedom to express sexual content. However, it was no sooner than after the World War II when there was a shift in attitudes in sexuality and gender. The sexual revolution started in 1960s and lasted up to 1980s and the effect this movement caused was enormous, the revolution has changed traditional behaviour related to sexuality and to relationships in general. The sexual liberation caused that not only heterosexual relationships were accepted, but also homosexual or polygamous. There was also increased acceptance of public nudity, pornography or legalization of abortion and contraception. Many significant literary works were written during the sexual revolution and it was due not only to the historical turn in the Victorian scholarship but also to the increased number of women writing in that period. Subsequently, most scholarly work has incorporated to some extent attention to gender and sexuality, emerging primarily from the women's movement as well as from civil rights.<sup>28</sup> The literature during this period was born out of feminist interests and focused primarily on middle-class white women. The



writings tended to privilege the history of feminist activism and consciousness and attempted to recover forgotten literary history of women's writing. As Pamela K. Gilbert says in her book *Gender the early literature of this era also focused largely on "reading women writers' resistance to patriarchy and on the representation of female characters."* 29 In general, this period was marked by sexual exploration and queer culture, as is also reflected in *Mrs. Dalloway* or in the latter novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* Nonetheless, this chapter focuses on the four writers already mentioned in the introduction; Charlotte Brontë, Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson, each of them writing in a different decade, or even century, Charlotte Brontë in the first half of the 19th century, Thomas Hardy in the second half of the 19th century, Virginia Woolf in the first half of the 20th century and Jeanette Winterson in the second half of the 20th century. Women were still perceived as wives, mothers and keepers of the household at the beginning of the 19th century, nevertheless, the repulsion and the need of independence started to be apparent. As the development of feminism has evolved during the centuries, even writers projected their characters with more liberation and freedom.

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## College at Glimpse

Shri Harihar Pratishthan is established in the year 2012 with a noble intention to provide the facilities of the higher education to this economically and socially backward area. Mr. Dhanrajji Joshi was instrumental in bringing this institution into existence. It is the very first Night College in entire Marathwada region. "Learning while Earning" is the mission statement of our Institution. The college has organized One Day National Conference on 18<sup>th</sup> February in the academic year 2018-19.

### SALIENT FEATURES OF THE COLLEGE

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Registered Office:

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09637335551, 07020828552 E-mail:wizcraftpublication@gmail.com

# WIZCRAFT

Publications & Distribution Pvt. Ltd.

ISBN 978-93-86013-81-1



9 789386 013811

Rs. 500/-