

Gender and Misogyny in Classical Literature: Tracing the Cultural Roots of Misogynistic Attitudes and Their Modern Consequences

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Abstract

This paper looks into antiquity and determines the role of gender. Women representation in classical literature and what impact these early imprints cast on the later works. In Classical literature, Women are portrayed as the object of sex, rape and pleasures. Their individual existence is fairly vague but only in connection to male presence. This misogynistic approach took its roots in very early literature, and handed over to us with almost the same features. Female illustration in the Classical Literature is one of such misogynistic theories. Likewise, Reader's response cannot be marginalized while discussing classical – gender – portrayal. Print-media shapes readers' lives. How far is it true, needs to be carefully scrutinized in order to indulge in further discussion. Based upon these misogynistic theories, the inferences at the end are startling, presenting before us pathetic picture of social values and customs. We cannot negate the pen-power. No doubt it can mould reader's mind according to writer's thinking. The way writer thinks can become the way of thinking of the particular reader too. The whole process is very subtle and imperceptible, even reader himself cannot feel the changes happening in him by reading and absorbing the very ideas of the writer. This game of perception to the paradigm shift is played by the creators of literary caricatures. Statistics about women homicide leave a sour taste in our mouth. And an urge to replenish a whole new standard of writing upon sensitive issues. Continuing focus upon biased pieces of literature would at least diminish the effects, if cannot eliminate it altogether.

Keywords: Antiquity, Classical, Gender, Paradigm Shift, Misogyny

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Introduction

What is Literature?

The term “Literature” is used to describe “written and spoken” fantasized material. Derivative from Latin word, “literature”, which means “writing with the help of letters.” It more commonly refers to works of “creative imagination”. (Lombardi, 2017) Simply, literature represents certain culture and traditions of people speaking particular language with similar demographics. A body of “canonical expressions”, to be more precise.

Literature is a vast field with different interwoven genres. In this present study we are typically concerned with poetic forms, tragedies and dramatic write ups where characters present hyper-realistic human life conditions. Literature has always been one of the basic influences of socio-cultural system. Major or minor “Omissions and Additions” in the social structure can easily be done by the dramatists and poets. In a broader sense, literature is “single body” of written work; considered as a form of art, with “artistic and intellectual value”, made unique by “deploying language different from ordinary usage”. (Wikipedia, 2018). Though Literature is regarded as “the best expression of the best thought reduced to writing.” (Biswas). For Hogan, “Literature allows the readers to access the intimate emotional aspects of a person’s character that would not be obvious otherwise.” (Hogan, 2011)

Very significantly, literature deals with the psyche of the reader. It engulfs him into same situation the character is in. Relating himself with the character, reader feels the same aura all around him. He is no more living in real world, rather moves in a reverie. Hogan also states that “temporal and emotional” sum which a reader gives to understanding the character’s fictional situation in literature styles the literature as “ecologically, valid in the study of emotions.” (Hogan, 2011). So, Literature “unites” the whole reading community into one “universal emotional state.” The reader is more into learning new cultural – emotional experiences which otherwise is not possible. (Hogan, 2011) Authors also employ such effective literary devices which excite the “psychological emotions” of the readers. (Nezami, Feb, 2012)

It is a “blue print of human civilization” (Lombardi, 2017). From Classical literature to the modern and postmodern, i.e., from Greek Philosophers to Maya Angelou, literature gives a glimpse of different societies of the world. Thus, it is not just a

written cultural expression of societies of the world rather it is more a historical document of diverse experiences.

Thus, by definition literature is the other side of the coin, presenting human emotions, experiences and thoughts. The revelations of myriad of experiences make literature live presentation of mind. Reader can revel in this world and taking deep plunge into the river of experiences comes out imbued with the same feelings and emotions. This journey into the fictional world influences so much so that the reader becomes one with the writer.

According to Sartre, literature marvels other performing arts, the painter paints and leaves the final interpretation upon the onlooker, the musician composes and leaves the finale upon the listener; but the writer is someone, who paints with words and putting in the final tune influences the deeper recesses of human mind. “On the other hand, the writer deals with significations.” (Sartre, 1948) The reader magically starts seeing things with the eyes of the writer, feels like the writer, and listens only what is written to be listened to. He never moves away from the fictional world rather reinforces the thoughts of the writer. So, whatever the writer wants to promote in the social system is promoted with not much effort.

The written words for the reader are “the prolongations of his meanings, his pincers, his antennae, his eyeglasses. He maneuvers them from within; he feels them as if they were his body; he is surrounded by a verbal body which he is hardly aware of and which extends his actions upon the world.” (Sartre, 1948)

A number of Scholars have claimed potential power of literature to “evoke empathy and self- reflection”, which eventually leads to social behavior. This paper will try to answer certain questions which remained idle in the minds for ages. What effects literary reading have upon minds? How can these effects be claimed as “indelible influences” upon society? Through pragmatic research we can get at some palpable answers to these questions.

There is a deep connection between writing - style and social behavior. The mind of the writer is laid open before the readers, they can pick and choose whatever they want according to their moods and modes of life. There is no denying the fact that pen is quite powerful enough to channel thoughts of the readers. To what extent this is applicable to the social evils is main focus of this paper. Misogynistic writings

have greatly changed the outlook of male faction of the society towards their female counterparts. The statistics of women homicide are evidences of such powerful misogynistic writings and the ultimate resultant factors.

Literature has historically mirrored and magnified societal issues, including homicide, by exploring the motives and societal pressures behind violent acts. For example, in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, the murder committed by Raskolnikov reflects not just individual psychology but also the societal alienation and economic despair of 19th-century Russia. This portrayal resonates with sociological understandings of crime as a symptom of broader structural issues, linking literary narrative directly to real-world patterns of homicide.

Difference between Classic and Classical Literature

Words “Classic” and “Classical” are used “interchangeably” by many of the scholars but actually these are far different in nature. (Lombardi, 2017) “Classical Literature” refers to the literature produced in Classical Age, mainly the works of Greek, Roman and other primordial civilizations. Main writers and poets of Classical literature are Homer, Sophocles, Ovid etc. The study of these Ancient Writers was considered to be of high quality and absolute mandatory for all the students of Social Sciences. It was part of an elite education. These classical writings are the basis of all the genres of modern literature. Thus foundation-style of today's literature is inherited from Classical Literature produced in antiquity.

On the other hand, Classic is the quality of being “timeless”. These books retain their popularity in all ages. Some of the classical literature fall into this category too. Literary works having cultural importance, and any book that is the first of any particular genre would be considered as classic work of literature. (Lombardi, 2017) What is Misogyny? Why it should be highlighted?

According to the definition Misogyny is obvious showing of hatred of women, to the extent of ill-treatment. Following characteristics of Misogyny can be helpful to better understand connotations of the word:

- A misogynist first analyses woman to make her, his target of aggression. While making this choice he seems to be absolutely docile and friendly towards the opposite sex.

- Often a misogynist is a split personality. In this duality of his person, he possesses two facades – the one he really is and the other which is public.
- As far as keeping promises to women is concerned a misogynist always fails because he has a split personality, he makes promises just to fool, hurt and mutilate feelings of other sex.
- A misogynist is known for his controlling and arrogant interaction with women.
- Whenever there is atmosphere of competition especially with women, a misogynist shows his hatred and abominable behavior.
- A misogynist intentionally makes woman feel miserable even in routine matters.
- He tries to make woman unhappy, sad and hurt. And enjoys his torturing behavior.

The most detestable aspect of misogynist is that he tries to control women emotionally and forcibly takes sexual advantage. A study shows that a misogynistic attitude of males can be very dangerous as they are prone to rape and physically injure women. In this act they take pride and feel inner satisfaction. Extreme jealousy is also one of the by-products of misogynistic assertiveness.

Misogyny, sexism, and patriarchy have been interchangeably used the world over. In all of these terms there are methodologies similar to each other, to suppress, constrain and contain women from active participation in social system. First let's take patriarchy, it is a particular socio-cultural structure with "male dominance". (Annie McGrew, 2017)

Theoretical Framework

In order to find out the congenital correlation between misogyny and women homicide we have to rely upon the information that we have in our day-to-day life, which is the real presentation of the narrative. Or the narratives present the real presentation of the information of our lives. Both ways, the reader either interprets the information transported or links the interpretation of his real life to that of the story. These narratives include "mediated stories" or "journalistic narratives". Many of the beliefs from antiquity have been transported to the new generations through the medium of stories. It has been believed by philosophers of all ages that stories are powerful tool to change the ideals, values and even intellectual behaviors of the

audiences. (M.C Green). This “powerful tool” (Green M. C., 2000) can change the customs of the audiences too.

“Literature’s potential” (Koopmann & Hakemulder, 2015) influence has been acclaimed by many academics. They assert that literature can best develop “pro social behavior” (Koopmann & Hakemulder, 2015). “Educational Entertainment or the Edutainment” is fictional style of educating people. (Singhal A. M.) Research has shown that through this method people learn and accept information without mental resistance. (Singhal A. a., 2002) Many learn from fictional source rather than from factual. (Marsh, 2003) Research has also shown that through fiction the understanding of Audience is more enhanced, as audience experiences the same situations with the story and then transport back this information to the real world when the entertainment is over. (Green M. C., 2000).

Individual’s attitudes are more influenced by fiction like “advertising and formal education”. (Jarvis, 2008). According to Larsen, Reader understands the feelings inculcated by the stories at his own personal level. He blends the very information with his previous-self-understanding. (Larsen, 1996) Readers use their personal history to interpret the emotions and information they read in the narrative. (Miall, 2002)

This persuasive power of literature has been termed as “transportation” (Gerrig, 1993). A metaphor which explains the mental journey of the reader into the fictional world. This transportation is “integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings, focused on story events” (Green M. C., 2009). “Transportation is a natural psychic mechanism, “the more transported by the narrative, the more recipients endorsed story consistent beliefs”. (Green & Brock, 2000).

According to academics, “the line that differs memories of fictional events in the stories and the real-life events becomes blur for the readers.” (Biocca, 2002) There is no denying the fact that literature plays very important role in moulding the minds of readers into specific lines. Especially when the minds are young and immature. Specific ideas about life are formed when the minds are too young and susceptible to anything. “Values are created” in the age from infancy to teens, considered as immature childhood. (Ewert, 2005). Shelley emphasizes that “childhood has also been identified as an important time for stories to influence.”

(Shelley, 1990). The unconscious influence of stories can bring behavioral changes without deliberation. (Cooper, 2005)

Transportation depends upon the aptitude and the attitude of the reader. It can be trait transportability or need for affect. (Markus Appel, 2011) It has been examined in recent research that the “persuasive impact” of a story as compared to rhetoric message is more comprehensive. Transportability gets deeper into the reader. (P, M, J, & N, 2010). As far as the second approach is concerned i.e., need for affect, or a “generalized attitude regarding one’s own feelings”, is according to the need of the reader. How much he wants to be touched emotionally for himself or for others. (Maio & Esses, 2001) Thus, narratives create sympathy for the characters in the heart of the readers, when “readers’ and texts’ value horizon match”. (Koopmann & Hakemulder, 2015)

What we understand from the above discussion, is that narratives sure have power enough to influence the inner feelings of the reader. Whether need for affect or the transportability trait reader cannot be left without deeper effects of it. Researchers have agreed on the “persuasiveness” of the narratives. But then there comes some ethical choices on the part of the narrator. These ethical or non-ethical messages conveyed through narrative are actually “personality profiling”. These give “rise to ethical concerns”. (Markus Appel, 2011) According to ethics “creators of persuasive technology should never seek to persuade a person of something they themselves would not consent to be persuaded to do.” (Berdichevsky & Neunschwander, 1999). Thus, the narrators are not allowed to deceive or “manipulate recipients”. (Markus Appel, 2011)

Reading literature changes the readers’ mind, this is as old an idea as literature itself. But while going through the norms of literature, ethical persuasiveness, or morality, we have been thinking whether reading literature makes us a better human being, or leave us with some unwonted ethical norms, entrenched within us for ages. Philosophers are finding better solution to ethical persuasiveness. Rules and regulations are set for write ups. Unfortunately, the mind is uncontrollable. Writer’s mind cannot be harnessed, we cannot buckle up the freedom of speech. Everyone has right to express what he feels like and wants to be practically in this world. Self-portrayal is allowed in literature. We find several good writers actually giving auto-bio events in books. That self-portrayal is what we are most concerned with. Ethical and non-ethical strings can be felt here. And the problem sprouts here too.

“Persuasion is an intentional effort” (Berdichevsky & Neunschwander, 1999). “From a deontological or Kantian perspective, however, an ethically righteous goal would not allow communicators to deceive or manipulate recipients.” (Markus Appel, 2011). Momentarily, readers adrift with emotions and try to convince themselves of having identical situations in real life. In this process of matching hypothetical situations with real one the writer wins over the cognition of the readers. If the notion is intended for social betterment, need to affect may be considered a legal process in the morality system. But if the same notion is applied for harm’s sake within the society, the ethical point must be noted immediately by the communicator.

Misogyny – Classical Literature

Reading Literature implicates psychological processes that question the adequacy of our ethical reflection. It consists of insight into human character and moral-self-knowledge. (Benjamins, 2000). This is actually called “ethical effect”. It affects our values and ethical behavior in the society. So, narratives can be indirectly related to the ethical reasoning. As reading involves all the psychological and emotional receptive, some of them train our minds to behave in a certain way. Hence our mind is trained to respond intuitively to certain hypothetical situations and apply the experience in the same manner to real life experiences. (Benjamins, 2000).

Let’s have a look upon literature first, that has been handed over to us by our antiquities. In Classical Greek and Roman Literature, the first thing that sharply strikes our sense of keen observation, is that all of the philosophers were males. This paper at this stage tries to judge the writings as pro or gender biased. There are certain text excerpts to prove our point.

Literature has been mode of expression for ages not even on record. But those of record present a clear picture of people who loved story-telling. Philosophers presented their stream of thoughts through stage presentations or in written form. Greek Literature started in and around 3rd Millennium BC. It started with religious spectrum to engage most of the audiences. As the time passed Literature became the holt of renowned philosophers. They produced Tragedies, Comedies and Satyrs. Among them Tragedies got power enough to hold audiences and achieve “persuasive impact” and do “personality profiling”.

Greek Society at the time, placed huge emphasis on expression of thought through literature. In fact, the whole library of Western literature started with Greek Literary works. Much of the western poetry is inspired by Homer. But Greeks not only produced best of epics but also masterpieces of Tragedy and some of the comedies. That is still par excellence and have no precedence over unity of plot and tragic elements. There is hardly any idea in today's literature which has not been inspired by the Ancient Greek Literature.

Roman Literature written in Latin also has full forced influence upon modern literature. Though Roman literature flourished under the auspices of Greek philosophers, it could gain its height around 1 BC onwards. The terms Greek and Roman literature carries huge connotation of cultural backdrop. We must not forget throughout this paper that Western Culture is based upon Classical culture, and Western Literature has its foundation upon Classical Literature. Thus, the personality profiling of both is based upon similar aspects.

Big example is Homer's "Odyssey". As our paper in hand is dealing with women characterization in Classical Literature, we will discuss only the women portrayals. If we judge it from the modern literary standards, Homer in Odyssey treats women in a sexist manner. Women are judged by looks; the most beautiful ones are for gods. They are the "that prize". (195) Women are commodified in expression. Not one word for their accomplishments rather they are known for the deeds of male counterparts. In most occasions, women are projected to keep themselves aloof from other male members of the household, while men can feast victories. Wife of Nestor also does not participate in the normal routines of the palace and same is the case with Penelope. Even Ariadne's life is shown as "useless" because she did not please Theseus. Odysseus's wife Penelope, is rebuked openly by her young son. Thus, Homer presents female clique as a 2nd degree class of the society and "inferior to men".

Another Greek poet, Hesiod 8th, 7th Century BC, very indigenous in his prolific writings opens up his mind upon women in his famous Theogony, and Works and Days. It is supposed to have been written in 700BC. For him, "The very creation of women was set as a punishment to man". Xenophon confirms the classical note of misogyny. In his "Oeconomicus" he says "Women are much more fearful, while men are more courageous (Oost, 1977). Xenophon proclaims that women are physically

inferior to men. Their primary role is to bear the child of man. Thus, it infers that they are only the source of production by remaining subservient to man (Oost, 1977). Only men have rational mind, while women are just passionate, is the belief of Aristotle. He also believed that men were natural leaders and women were prize for men. For him, "The relation of male to female is by nature a relation of superior to inferior and ruler to ruled" (Barnes, 1984). Ancient Athens witnessed the women as the most "ignoble" (Gomme, 1937) creatures living. Friedrich Jacobs, in his work "Beitrag zur Geschichte des weiblichen Geschlechtes (1830) remarked that the position of women in Ancient Greece was "demeaned". The women were tolerated only as necessary evil, Jacob says. If we look at the misogynistic attitude of the Church authorities, of that time, it is evident how women were regarded with venomous contempt, they were secluded, as well as uneducated. The same social structure is reflected in the literature of that time.

Euripides, in his play *Hippolytus* exposes women immoral attitudes towards men. He suggested that women were not trustworthy, and they should not be treated equally to men in thought and discretion. The Roman and Greek social-historian present an enigma of myths, wonder if women were there when myths were created. Women are there in every genre of the classical literature, but their presence is biased, and the author quite distort the presence of women. The tragedies, comedies and poetry were all produced by men. Hence there are taints of misogyny in these ancient literatures. These satirists have lost credibility because women presence is nowhere for counter argument. Tragedies cannot be the source of picturing women truly as "attitudes of poets towards women are revealed". They express their ideal and fantasies, about the other sex. The ancient literature is a puzzle with important pieces missing. These puzzles cannot give the true life of an average woman.

The representation of homicide and gender violence in literature is not merely fictional; it serves as a mirror to societal realities and a blueprint for cultural behavior. Literature does not exist in a vacuum—it both absorbs and informs societal norms. By intertwining psychological desensitization and sociological reinforcement of gender roles, literature and media can play a formative role in shaping how violence is understood, justified, or condemned. Historical and literary case studies underscore this influence, revealing the urgent need to examine cultural artifacts as more than entertainment, but as agents of social conditioning.

Impervious Impacts Upon Human living

The super – relative imageries found in literature impact greatly the lives of the audience, there is no denying the fact. Take example of Superman, or the Spiderman. Children at very minor age try to act like them. They idealize these heroes with supernatural powers, saving the humanity. Thus, comic books with ideals become popular among children as well as adults equally. It is natural phenomenon of human mind that it gets attracted towards that which is beyond its powers or limits. We, unconsciously in our virtual world behave like those super heroes. It's the magical power of the writer, who manipulates the minds of the general masses at a colossal level.

Thus, can we not suggest that the goods and evils, in the society, are induced much by the writers – through media generally. If mindset of the whole social structure is to be altered 90 degrees, throw literature into it, you will get amazing results. Film industry plays very important role, in creating violent behaviors. Who does not want to be The Terminator, or the Warrior, or the Rambo and get away with happy ending after mass destruction and genocide? Through these movies, generations are polluted with spiteful minds, which turn into practical damages to the society. Who is responsible for the creation of “Red Pill”? The faction of Men who don't understand women, and act violently against them. They have a philosophy based on misogyny i.e., “Females get away with the things by virtue of being females.” And males are left behind to suffer. Thus, a sequel of hatred is being sown in the environment by the followers of this philosophy. Feminism is regarded as a fake ideology. They argue that society is getting anti-male because of the presence of females. The name of the community “Red Pill” is taken from the movie “The Matrix” where the protagonist Keanu Reeves pops a Red Pill to unplug his mind to explore the genuine reality of the world. But for this internet community the reality is that the males are actually oppressed and not the females. Red Pills more indulged in talking about having sex. They tell the strategies to attract females. It is becoming a cult, where males talk about how to oppress women and suppress their role in the society. So, what they are promoting – Rape, and the justification of it too. Or more violent to women. Western media is particularly interested in Classical literature, and there are hordes of references to it in print or social media. Why is that so? Because they get satisfaction about their own misogynic ideals. Travelling thus the stream of violence against women has become a major concern globally. Even small girls are not safe at the hands of these sick minds.

Case Study: The “Werther Effect”

Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was linked to a wave of suicides in the 18th century, demonstrating how literature can directly influence real behavior. Similar parallels can be drawn to gender-based violence when narratives normalize or romanticize control, jealousy, or revenge.

Historical Parallel: Victorian Literature and Domestic Violence

Victorian novels often depicted domestic abuse as a private, moral failing rather than a public crime. These portrayals reinforced the notion that male dominance was natural, thus legitimizing spousal violence within that cultural context.

Conclusion

To understand the roots of modern misogyny, we will have to go back to 3000 years back. This power network laid thousands of years back, has got a strong grip over our social structure. The result is femicide throughout the world. At some places is it in the form of Satti, at some Vanni or Karo Kari, or at some simple killing. If we take account of the crimes against women globally, the statistics would be startling. Starting with the most liberal society United States of America, domestic violence is a Pervasive Human Rights Violation that continues to affect women in all the States. According to a survey of National Crime Victimization conducted in 2008, approximately 552, 000 violent crimes were committed by Intimate Partner against women, the number includes 35,000 rapes, 38,000 robberies with sexual assault, 70,000 aggravated sexual assaults and 406, 530 simple assaults. The survey records that 500 women are raped /sexually assaulted every day in USA. Domestic Violence is underreported to judge the actual number of cases. The government fails to counteract. The police fail to respond on time in Intimate Partner Violence.

A 2009, Department of Justice USA, reports that in domestic violence cases the abusers are rarely prosecuted with serious offence. Again, a misogynic act on the part of policy makers. The government itself does not seem serious to check these crimes against women.

Impressed, by the media whether it is print, film or the social media the violence towards women is on high throughout the world. An average of 137 women across

the world are killed by a partner or family member every day, according to new data released by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). More than half of the 87,000 women killed in 2017 were reported as dying at the hands of those closest to them. Of that figure, approximately 30,000 women were killed by an intimate partner and another 20,000 by a relative. Forty-seven women, 21 countries, one day: The UN statistics summarize the findings for 2017 based on homicide statistics provided by government sources. The figures for "gender-related killings of women and girls", or "femicide", are collated using the criteria of intimate partner/family-related homicide.

The media, as both a reflector and shaper of cultural norms, plays a dual role in the construction of gender-based violence. From a psychological standpoint, repeated exposure to violent narratives can desensitize audiences, making them more accepting of aggression toward women. Sociologically, literature and media often reinforce patriarchal norms, subtly legitimizing control or violence as expressions of masculinity. For instance, in classic literature like Shakespeare's *Othello*, jealousy and possession are dramatized in ways that blur the line between love and violence—an ambiguity that still influences contemporary attitudes toward gendered relationships.

“Why extremists always focus on women remains a mystery to me,”
U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said recently.

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