

## **Early Signs of Feminist Issues in the Works of Some European, American, and Arab Writers**

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This paper incorporates some notes that purport to trace – albeit briefly – some early signs of feminist issues in world literature which have contributed to the change in the role and image of women in literature. The period covered by these notes is the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. The paper will specifically center on the works of George Eliot, George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, Henrik Ibsen, as European writers; Kate Chopin from America; and Qasim Amin, Rifaa Tahtawi, Muhammad Abdu, Huda Sharawi, Mayy Ziadeh as Arab writers. In the course of this paper we will examine some major works by the above writers through brief thematic and character portrayals, which are intended to reveal analogies in the process of transformation in the depicting the image of women from that of social conformity into the modern autonomous less conforming and self-assured image.

### **Some Western Writers**

**George Eliot:** In the *Mill on the Floss* Eliot presents the female character, Maggie Tulliver, the highly intellectual character, as a sister who is wholeheartedly devoted to her brother, Tom, who seems unworthy of this devotion. Eliot felt the need for her heroine to depend on some masculine power. Remarkable in the growing up of Maggie is her falling in love with Stephen. The depiction of this love is idiosyncratic in that different from the other accounts of love affairs. Maggie transforms Stephen's character by her intellectual deep mysterious character which is unlike all the females he had known:

“He (Stephen) wished he had never seen this Maggie Tulliver to be thrown into a fever by her in this way. She would make a strange sweet troublesome adorable wife to some man or other but he would never have chosen her himself.” (*The Mill on the Floss* P385).

Social traditions and restrictions prevent Maggie from happiness and fulfillment. Her tragic end and her abandonment of Stephen's love reflect her sense of duty and devotion as well as the tragic influence of the society upon her. Dorothea, the heroine of *Middlemarch*, is another intellectual example of Eliot's attempt to depict the image of the new woman. Dorothea's suffering and frustration reflect the faulty society which does not allow such intellectual females to assert their characters. The faults that Dorothea commits reflect the state of confusion that the new woman goes through on her path to self-realization.

**George Meredith :** Meredith is another writer of the same period who dealt with the feminist issue through his female characters in *The Egoist* and *Diana of the Cross Ways*. Through character portrayal in these two novels Meredith highlights the theme of the suffering of women. His ideas were considered at the time to be “revolutionary” and “radical”. Clara is probably among the more successful female portraits by a male novelist. She initially accepts “Patterne” the ideal husband by Victorian standards but gradually apprehends Meredith's concepts of marriage as a true expansion of a woman's life and as woman's intensified sharing of life's adventure as a partner. Meredith convincingly imparts an empathy for Clara as she desperately seeks to evade the enormity of Patterne's ego which is the product of the class and era and the pattern of the highly praised Victorian gentleman “There should be nothing dishonorable in rescuing a girl from an engagement she detested.” (*The Egoist* P. 121). On the other hand, Whiteford, the one who helps Clara get rid of Patterne, and whom she loves and marries, represents the anti-Victorian hero and the unconventional free thinker. Diana in *Diana of the Cross Ways* with her attractive Irish beauty is another example of the newly emerging feminine character. She is witty and intelligent but commits dreadful mistakes to reach self-understanding and realization. Crossways, the family home of Diana is also a word symbolizing womanhood at the threshold of modernity and transformation.

**Thomas Hardy:** Hardy's female characters like Eustacia in *The Return of the Native*, Sue Brighthead in *Jude the Obscure* and Tess in *Tess of d'*

*Urbervilles* further help to illustrate the issue under discussion ( i.e. conscious depiction of unconventional female characters). Eustacia (the raw material of divinity) yearns to escape from the desolate Egdon Heath. Although she loves Wildeve, she leaves him and gets married to Clym (the native) a Parisian jeweler, who had recently returned home. Eustacia's talents, perhaps a blessing elsewhere are here an insurmountable curse. She yearns for the assertion of her character but this ill-conceived world is contrived only to smash her dreams.

Sue Brighthead and Tess are other examples. Sue in *Jude the Obscure* is another intellectual young girl who lives with Jude and bears children from him although she was married to Phillston. Jude in the story gets married twice. He first marries Arabella, the vulgar country girl, for physical fascination. He soon gets disillusioned with her and leaves her to marry Sue. It seems that Hardy wants to say that if the two brides were united , they would make one good bride. Jude's fluctuations from Arabella to Sue reflect his feelings that he needs both ladies to be put together. The name Brighthead is a symbolic name symbolizing Sue's or the new woman's intellectuality. This idea of marriage is expressed by Jude when he says to Sue:

“but you are my wife. Yes you are. You know it. I loved you and you loved me and that made the marriage. We still love each other therefore our marriage is not cancelled” (*Jude the Obscure* P 285)

Similarly, Tess in Hardy's other novel reflects the cruelty of the society with women who are trying to achieve their identity and character but are smashed by the prevailing conventional traditions.

**Kate Chopin:** Kate Chopin's famous novel *The Awakening* belongs to the same chronological period chosen for the study. Chopin skillfully describes the growth of Edna Pontellier's sense of identity and her physical and spiritual awakening to seek knowledge and passion. From the details of Edna's life as a wife and a mother emerges a poignant portrait of a woman oppressed by the roles which are foisted on the female whether or not she is suited for them. Edna therefore breaks away from the conventional role of wife and mother . The story was subtitled “ a solitary soul” as a symbol for Edna's solitude on the path of freedom and autonomy. It starkly reflects Edna's evolution from romantic fantasies into self definition and self-reliance. At the beginning, Edna was caught in the bustling social world and in her domestic role of a wife

and mother. By the end, she stands absolutely alone and plunges naked into the sea to escape from the soul's slavery into freedom. Edna's character is contrasted with the conventional Adele "the mother woman" and the unmarried artist Mademoiselle Reisz, the self-assertive and outspoken character. The political and aesthetic weapons she has in her coup d'état are only forks and knives, glasses and dresses. Thus, Edna's drowning is an indication of rebirth after crossing the sea of current and change.

Chopin deliberately titles her story . "The Awakening" not Edna's awakening, which suggests that Chopin saw Edna's experience as something universal.

**Henrik Ibsen:** There are definite indications that Meredith and Hardy were influenced by Ibsen's plays. They saw the performance of *The Doll's House*. Their opinions on marriage have a lot in common with Ibsen's views. Through his female portraits; Nora in *The Doll's House* and Ellida in *The Lady from the Sea* he depicts more heroines on the path of struggle and rights-seeking Nora, the wife who is treated and pictured as a child or a doll , grows in character and understanding. This transformed Nora says to her husband who rejects her when his honor was threatened although she sacrificed everything for him.

“ I believe that before everything else I'm a human being just as much as you are or at any rate I shall try to become one” (*The Doll's House* P. 228).

Nora suddenly and bitterly realizes that for eight years she has been treated merely as the lovely possession of her husband

“I have been your doll wife just as I was papa's doll child and the children have been my dolls in their turn”( *The Doll's House* P226).

Elmer, Nora's husband, would not allow her character to grow or exceed beyond the pattern he assigned for her as his charming Cinderella adoring her loving prince. Through Nora, Ibsen strongly expressed his assistance for women in their new battle that they were forced to go through in order to gain freedom, autonomy and self realization.

### **Arab Writers**

Moving to Arabic literature of the same period ( late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries), we can name many writers who dealt with the same type of

issues raised by Western writers referred to in the course of this review of "feminist ideas". Indeed the era under discussion witnessed a noticeable presence of enlightened ideas that called for the education and liberation of Arab women.

It should be pointed out in this context that the attempts of the Arab women to gain their freedom, independence and self-realization faced a stronger and more powerful opposition than in Western societies.

Going through the works of the pioneer writers who called for the change in spite of the strong opposition we will find writers like Riffa Tahtawi, Shiek Mohammed Abdu-Qasem Amin, Huada Sharawi, Mayy Ziyadeh, Hafez Ibrahim and many others. These writers had to encounter strong and fierce opposition for their radical views, characterized at the time as "irreligious" ideas. These writers had to fight the long established norms which restricted the role of the woman to the house and the long established ideas which looked at women as inferior in thinking and religious devotion. Such old-fashioned views do not in fact stem from the principles of Islam but rather from social conventions and traditions.

**Riffa'a Tahtawi:** In his book *The True Guide for Boys And Girls* Tahtawi argues that when women get educated, they will be able to think and reason in a logical manner and to share with their brothers, husbands and children in discussions and planning. Furthermore, they can make use of their time and energy in work and hence contribute to social development instead of staying idle for long times.

Tahtawi even touches on the sensitive issue of the "veil". He contends that the virtue of a woman does not depend on her being veiled or not but rather on the good education and upbringing she has. (*Al Murshid Al Ameen* P 258).

**Muhammed Abdu:** Muhammed Abdu is another Arab writer who called for changing the negative social attitudes towards women. In *The Complete Works of Muhammed Abdu*, he calls for the right of the woman to choose her husband. Her choice of her future husband will not, however, be wise – he maintains- unless she gets educated. He also says that marriage should be based on the liking of two persons to each other. Abdu shows his disapproval for the misapplication of the religiously allowed (yet restricted) polygamy and says that it should be restricted to some very limited cases.

**Qasim Amin:** Qasim Amin is another writer who fought strongly for women's rights. He saw great differences between the European women and the Arab women. In his two famous books: *The Liberation of Women* and *The New Woman* he called for giving women their rights in education and respectable social roles. He also called for the unveiling of women and for allowing/encouraging woman to work.

**Huda Sharawi:** Huda Sharwi was not only a writer but an activist who strongly called for the liberation of Arab women and for granting women equal rights. Salama Mousa, the Egyptian thinker described her a "social fighter". Indeed she particularly fought actively for women's rights in education.

**Mayy Ziyadeh:** Mayy Ziyadeh, the famous woman writer, contributed a great deal to the question of women's rights. Her life style and character were live proof for her ideas. Her illuminated mind drew to her the best of male thinkers and writers of her age who met regularly at her house every Tuesday for twenty years. Among these were Taha Hussien. Al-Aqqad and many others. At the time such a practice by a women was considered revolutionary and unprecedented.

**Mohammed Hasanein Haikal:** Another example of early Arab literary works that brought up the issue of women's rights is Mohammed Hasanein Haikal's novel *Zeinab*. At the end of the story of her struggle the lovely village girl Zeinab suffers and dies of T.B.. Her last words were severe blame for her family for destroying her life by forcing her to get married to someone she didn't love.

**Hafiz Ibrahim:** The Egyptian poet Hafiz Ibrahim and other Arab poets, e.g. Az-Zahawi and Al-Rasafi of Iraq, touched on several women issues. For example, in one of his famous poems – Hafez Ibrahim says "women are not pieces of jewelry to be hidden or pieces of furniture to be possessed. Every thing changes and women remain static and unchanged." (*Hafez Ibrahim's Poetry Vol. I, p. 282*)

The conclusion that may be legitimately drawn from the above brief exposition of different social backgrounds as reflected in some well-known literary works is that the works reviewed above represent the beginning of the awareness of the necessity of social change, particularly, the long established social modes which denied women

many of their rights. The writers either directly or through the portrayal of characters in their works sensed the urgent need for the change in women's image and role. They paved the way for women to get their rights and autonomy. They also helped in the transformation of women and in shaping the image of the modern, educated, active self-assured woman. This new transformed image of women was the blending together of human vision from different parts of the globe.

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