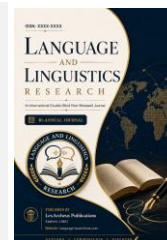




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Rewriting Female Identity: A Feminist Reading of Contemporary English Novels

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ABSTRACT

The 20th century English literary works have become an important arena to discuss the changing definition of womanhood and the intricacies of women's lives in modern society. Many of the modern novels showcase women as active protagonists who defy the norms of patriarchy, face challenges to identity and assert their independence in various social and cultural settings, as opposed to the passive or marginal representations which have been traditionally portrayed. This research is on the portrayal of the female identity in some of the contemporary English novels in the light of feminist literary theory. It studies the representation of themes of gender, agency, resistance, selfhood, empowerment and the representation of issues related to discrimination, cultural expectations, family relations and social inequality by women writers. The article also explores the ways in which these narratives challenge dominant gender myths and help to shape the feminist conversation by providing new conceptions of womanhood. Using text analysis and feminist criticism, the study illustrates how the status of women changes in the English novel as it develops throughout the centuries and how it acts as a cultural critique and social transformation tool. The results indicate that the re-writing of the female identity in modern fiction is an ongoing process of re-defining the role, voice and expectations of women in the fast-changing world; therefore, these texts have significant contributions to the feminist studies and modern literature studies.

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INTRODUCTION

The depiction of women as writers' is a significantly changed image in the last few decades, reflecting changes in social, cultural and political lives that have taken place globally. In modern literature, specifically, women's experiences, identities, and struggles in society's conditioned by the constant presence of the Patriarchy came in focus. In contrast with the classic female herosine of previous lines of literature, where women are often seen in conventional roles, such as the passive victim or the subservient wife and mother, modern novels tend to portray females as multi-faceted characters—ones whom are able to project themselves, resist, and evolve. It has stimulated research into the representation of societal issues but also their contestation within literature, and therefore, this new ideal of equality and women's rights, which still exist today in contemporary society.

Feminist literary criticism has been a key means of analysing such transformations in the portrayal of women. Feminist criticism arose in the 20th century, during the second wave of feminism, to critique literature for its constructions and/or reinforcement of gender and its representation of the identity of women. Some scholars, like Elaine Showalter (1977), argue that literature ought to be learned from a women's perspective for the sake of recovering silenced voices of women and comprehending women's unique literature tradition. Likewise, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) argue that it is in women's literature that women frequently express resistance as well as a quest for personal identity as they journey against the cultural constructs they were expected to follow by societies dominated by men.

In Modern fiction, the role of woman has grown more dynamic. Modern novelists do not view identity as immutable and/or predetermined; instead, they portray it as a continuous process that is shaped by class, race, culture, education, sexuality, and so on. Feminist theorists have suggested that the concept of gender can be socially defined and not biologically based; literature can challenge the norms of femininity and women's place in society (Butler, 1990). This can therefore help in the interpretation of contemporary English novels as a means of understanding how women are finding their way to personal freedom, social expectations and cultural traditions to build independent identities.

Numerous contemporary women writers have been instrumental in this shift of the literature by including narratives that centre on women's voice and life. Themes of gender inequality, identity formation, intersectionality, discrimination, family relationships and female empowerment are discussed by authors such as Margaret Atwood, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Zadie Smith, Jeanette Winterson, and Bernardine Evaristo. They depict women who resist and break down systematic barriers and are revisiting the social, personal and cultural identity in a genericized literature and society. These suggest that in addition to being oppressed, women are resilient, with agency, and able to change in some degree (hooks, 2000).

In addition, current feminist literary studies have gone beyond the scope of earlier feminist literature since it's brought in the ideas of postcolonial feminism, intersectionality and transnational feminism into it. Intersectionality" was a concept by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) who illustrates the complexity of experiences for women and how they can not be explained exclusively in terms of gender, but instead must take into consideration their race or ethnicity, class, and other self-determining social identities. Today, novelistic works in English frequently depict female experiences in multiple and complex ways that examine and contest the actual meaning of womanhood and embody the intricacies of global societies.

Henrietta Jaspers is really going to investigate in the current research the image of the female identity in some selected contemporary English novels within the backdrop of feminist literary theoretic framework. It examines the recreation of gender identity of women in the novels of the modern era that breaks the male order, invalidate the accepted roles and depict women as non-dependants who could change their fate. In using close textual analysis based on feminist criticism, the article aims to show how an everyday example of contemporary English fiction can be considered as a product of social changes as well as a useful focal point for the spread of feminist ideals to the literature field concerning the theme of gender equality.

Literature Review

Over the period of years, feminist literary criticism has greatly influenced the study of women in literature by analysing literary works which reflect or contradict the ideologies of the patriarchal



system. In a philosophical reflection of her own male status, Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2011) described womanhood as "social". Male authorship of womanhood was first described by Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2011) who reflected socially and not genetically. Elaine Showalter (1977) extended feminist criticism with her proposition to study women's writing as a distinct literary tradition which aims at the recovery of marginalised women's voices and experiences. Gender critic Gilbert and Gubar (1979) pointed to nineteenth-century women writers who resisted against the constraints of patriarchy in their fiction by relying on symbols and symbolism. Judith Butler (1990) also redefined feminist theory by introducing the notion of gender performativity, which has come to mean that gender identities are continually made and upheld through social practices. bell hooks (2000) noted the importance of broadening feminist literary criticism to the interconnected systems of oppression – that is, beyond gender. This concept of intersectionality also gained prominence in the field of literary scholarship with Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) model of how multiple and overlapping identities affect women's experiences. Theories have been used to analyze novels like Margaret Atwood's *Oryx*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Short Stories*, Zadie Smith's *Swamiji*, and Bernardine Evaristo's *The Vintner's Daughter*, that brought into light the notion that contemporary writers of English (fiction) depicted women as being independent of the norm and feelings unhinged from traditional gender roles and were re-constructing their selves in a different social and cultural milieu (Tyson, 2015; Moi, 2002).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on textual analysis. Selected contemporary English novels are examined through the framework of feminist literary theory to explore the representation of female identity, gender, agency, and empowerment. Relevant secondary sources, including scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles, are used to support the analysis and interpret the literary texts within contemporary feminist discourse.

Representation of Female Identity in Selected Contemporary English Novels through the Lens of Feminist Literary Theory

Women's identity has become one of the central issues of modern English literature as a result of women's social, political and cultural

circumstances around the world. Female characters are also traditionally viewed as passive and dependent subjects who have little agency, restricted to domestic spheres and characterized as excluding themselves from public imagination. However, contemporary novelists have increasingly responded to such stereotypical images of women as passive, dependent and confined to domestic existence by portraying female characters who negotiate their identities against the backdrop of patriarchal expectations, social inequalities and cultural constraints. Feminist literary theory offers a good lens by which to view these changes, as it looks at the interplay between gender, power and literary representation. Feminist criticism does not assume that the notion of identity exists in a static and universal way, instead, it is perceived as socially and historically formed, ever-changing according to the institutions, traditions and personal experiences. Women are no longer only victims of oppression in modern novel, but agents who fight, define themselves and change society (Ardis, 2001).

Through this de-emphasis of male-centred narratives on female experiences and perspectives, the feminist literary criticism totally changed the way the literary text was read. There are many stereotypes and no distinct voices traditionally given to women in earlier literary texts. But feminist scholars criticized these ideas, claiming that literature is a reflection and reinforcer of Patriarchal ideologies, which affect the attitudes of society towards women. The rise of feminist criticism and theory sparked a rethinking by writers of the role of women in literature, ushering in a fashion of presenting female main characters as rounded characters complete with their own minds and perception of the world, moving beyond the role of symbol to an alternative one of substance. This transformation is most noticeable in modern English fiction, where women now play more prominent roles in the story and express their own dreams, worries and selves.

In the modern literature, the term "woman" does not only refer to the biological attributes of a woman to assume the role of a woman but also to psychological, cultural, economic and political factors that shape women's experiences in life. An understanding of identity is dynamic and is learned through family, society, education and employment and personal relationships. Today's female lead characters are usually subjected to various forms of discrimination as they try to balance their aspirations with their cultural responsibilities.



These stories demonstrate women's identity unfold as they are constantly negotiating between their personal wants and external expectations. The following representations illustrate that the understanding of the identity of women must be rooted in wider social contexts from which they derive opportunities and constraints. (Ardis & Lewis 2003).

This is one of the major events of modern English novels, the rejection of the binary which placed women behind the scene into either "pure kind" virtue or "evil" vice. Today's writers, on the other hand, depict women as multi-faceted persons, with cognitive powers, emotional depths and moral dichotomy that have long been the preserve of male heroes. This was a historical shift from the previous literary norms that allowed for women to be recognised by their readers as full, flesh-and-blood humans, and not just simplistic feminine personae. From the feminist literary theory perspective, the changes reflect an increasing ability of literature to question the patriarchal values of men and women in society. In this direction, contemporary novel therefore plays its part in reconstruction of the identity of women by recognizing the freedom, resilience and ability of women in making decisions.

Collectively, education often becomes a significant point of transformation in modern novels in which women are actively given matrical responsibilities. Education often is a pervading point of transformation in modern novels where the female role is actively feminizing. Education gives women opportunities to develop their minds, earn a living and participate in the world and to defy limiting traditional values. Some female characters advance in higher education, livelihood and personal goals although they face resistance from family and community to go. Women characters are offered higher education, career choices and personal aspirations more often than before, even when they are opposed by families or communities that still view traditional roles as superior. These stories exemplify the way how education serves as a way of creating self-awareness and confidence. In the modern novels in English, emphasis is placed on the intellectual agency of women, challenging the historical presumptions that knowledge, authority and leadership were predominantly male. Ardis and Lewis (2003) believe that women's encounter with modernity was deeply related to the growing opportunities for women to have education, an

educational opportunity that changed women's roles in public and cultural life.

Female independence is also a crucial aspect in the redefinition of female identity in the modern literature. In the older literature, frequently depicted women as being economically dependent upon fathers, husbands or other male relatives, restrict women's autonomy and strengthen the patriarchal authority. More commonly, books written today envision women in new professions, establishing themselves as successful professionals, and making their own financial choices. These depictions can help to show that economic freedom empowers women to make better decisions regarding their personal relationships, their personal life choices and their future ambitions. Financial independence is thus representative of other issues of equality and self-determination. Contemporary literature shows that empowerment of women is not just about the personal liberation of the woman, but also about inclusion in economic activities and women's accomplishments (Ardis, 2001).

The role of family and familial ties are still important in shaping the identity of women, but the subjects of the novels published in modern England raises questions on women's roles in the domestic sphere. Female characters, who have to deal with expectations about marriage, motherhood and care giving to attend to at the same time while striving for personal fulfillment and success in their careers. These stories do not vilify the family unit, but rather emphasize the need for alternative family structures, grounded in resourced relationships of mutual respect and shared responsibility. The pressures between personal goals and familial duty are always present and feature in this story as a recurring subject and way of dealing with the uncertainties of contemporary womanhood. These representations suggest that what it means to be a woman in contemporary society is about having some autonomy and also having "meaningful relationships", rather than blindly satisfying the social prescription (Ardis & Lewis, 2003).

A further important aspect of feminist literary criticism is the portrayal of sexuality and freedom of the body. In the twenty-first century, novels generally show women taking control of their lives, their bodies, their relations, and their reproductive decisions, thus overturning the traditional idea that female virtue was synonymous with passivity, submission and sexual repression. These narratives portray sexuality in a way which



suggests it is a part of identity, not only a social institution under the authority of 'man'. Contemporary fiction puts women's desire and consent on the front pages, thus challenging ordinary moral concepts which historically placed different demands on men and women. For feminist literary theory, these evolutions illustrate the potential of literature for fostering more sovereign and equal interpretations of women and men (Ardis, 2001).

Gender, Agency and Identity in Contemporary Women's Writing

Today, women writers have changed English for the better, by offering women characters whose lives have been expanded beyond the stereotypical domestic existence and gender-based expectations. By writing those stories, these authors in their criticism look at the systems of oppression of women through social, cultural and political structures and portray protagonists who can question, resist and redefine the patriarchal norms. Feminist literary theory is important for analysing these representations since it considers literature as a reflection of society and an instrument to combat unequal power relations. Feminist concerns concerning women's experiences in everyday life, as well as issues of agency, resistance, and empowerment have consequently come to be considered important areas in which to study in the context of contemporary English novels, particularly those involving women (Ardis 2001a).

Gender is still a major concern of women's writing today. Throughout the latter part of the 19th century, gender is not depicted as an inherent or a biologically given attribute, but rather as a social construction that is influenced by cultural practices, institutional frameworks, and historical inequalities. A woman can often be faced with expectations of how she acts, what kind of education and career she represents, and how she looks like, based on the masculine rules. These expectations can restrict women's opportunities and cement gender inequalities. Today's writers object to such preconceptions by featuring women who do not conform to a limited role in society and live their lives by personal goals and desires. From their discourses emerge ideas about the fluidity and the even the lack of universality of gender identities which are negotiated in the social interaction and individual agency (Ardis & Lewis, 2003).

Agency is another characteristic of modern women's literature. Agency is the capacity to make

independent choices, act with personal choice or autonomy with decision-making power over one's own life. The confident and self-aware heroines of many modern novels in English become more self-assured and aware progressively throughout the novel despite encountering discrimination, social pressure and institutional barriers. They take an active role rather than relying on a passive role given to them in a patriarchal society, to build their own future; they apply their education, work and participation in the political and personal life. Such portrayals contradict earlier literary tradition of women being largely and traditionally portrayed as reliant upon men for protection, identity and economic security. As the modern writers portray, women are reasonable, strong and can take control on their future life, the traditional view of women's outlook on life is thrown into disarray (Ardis, 2001).

The issue of identity is central to feminist literary discourse, reflecting the complex nature of intermesh of individuals' experiences or expectations with the socio-cultural world. More modern women writers write the concept of identity as changing and reactive instead of static and assigned. Female protagonists are frequently faced with intrapersonal struggles as the demands of family versus career vie for attention, along with the desire to balance cultural norms with personal goals. This tension is greater where the social status and life options of women are still subject to the Patriarchy. Contemporary novels via psychological characterizations convey that identity is the result of ongoing negotiation between the individual agency and the forces from outside the social sphere. However, these portrayals resist the simple notion of a woman definition and embrace the multi-faceted nature of women's lives in various cultural, economic and historical settings (Ardis & Lewis, 2003).

Education and the formation of a woman's identity are explored in many more modern books as well. Education is often represented as a process of change, as a way to empower women to think critically, to challenge patriarchal ideologies, to become intellectual independent, and to pursue employment goals. Women with access to education may become more self-confident to assert themselves in their resistance to customary gender norms perpetuated by families and communities. Women who have access to learning may become more self-confident when challenging, contesting and rejecting traditional approaches to gender ascribed to families and communities.



Education can subvert domestic stereotyping of women as well as open up career opportunities for them, as it leads to more critical introspection and thinking. These depictions of knowledge are literary manifestations which support the claim that knowledge can be a tool of empowerment that helps to challenge social inequalities and to create gender justice (Ardis, 2001).

Resistance constitutes another prominent theme in contemporary women's writing. Contrary to earlier literary depictions that saw women's obligations and sacrifice as virtues, modern novels feature women's fight against discrimination, oppression and unequal social order. Resistance can manifest as explicit political opposition, non-conformist behavior, education, or career, or simply not conforming to conventional ideas about marriage and home. Women rebel against the authority of the patriarchy, not through violence, but through resilience, determination and through the voice of women. Institutional bias and injustice can start with a single brave act that can challenge and slowly dismantle using all forms of resistance. In this modern period, writers thus portray resistance as an individual and collective process that involves broader movements for equality among men and women (Ardis & Lewis, 2003).

Marriage is often a central arena in which patriarchy is reflected, discussed and contrasted in modern English literature in fiction. A traditional narrative of literature would see marriage as the epitome of women's identity whereas modern female authors challenge the notions of marriage by examining its power dynamics that are at variance. Women protagonists are also looking for a relationship in which they are respected as equals, rather than treated like children with a few responsibilities who must accept the commands of a father Figure. Each of these stories is certainly one that embraces the institution of marriage, but values a woman's role beyond her role in marriage. It is therefore recommended that people revisit the correlation between traditional culturally expected gender roles and personal satisfaction (Caine, 2005).

Motherhood is also inverted in the current feminist novel. In many earlier writings, the role of a mother was often romanticised, with maternal responsibilities generally considered as the most important aspect of their lives, while neglecting to account for issues of emotion, psyche and social considerations. Motherhood is now depicted by

contemporary women as one of their identities rather than the most important. The female characters have to manage the demands of their children with occupational goals, personal aims and their own self-reliance, as they deal with societal norms of "ideal motherhood". These depictions seek to trouble the essentializing of women's roles while recognizing various motherhood experiences in different social and cultural worlds. Portrayals expand the conceptions of the literary that defines woman, drawing women's attention from the domestic sphere to one of participation in varied aspects of life (Ardis, 2001).

Economic independence, as repeatedly shown, is an important dimension of women's empowerment. The modern novel often portrays a female character engaging in a professional occupation, in an effort to obtain her financial independence and secure life decisions that do not depend on men. Financial independence is a key aspect of empowerment that allows women to leave harmful relationships, pursue further education and be able to have a more active role in public life. They all provide examples of how economic empowerment is interrelated with psychological self-assurance and social equality. Employment and financial resources as a means of earning income in the marketplace become thus a symbol for other forms of resistance against the patriarchal systems that limited women's participation in economic decision-making since ancient times (Ardis & Lewis, 2003).

The ability to join forces in women's solidarity as an important source of empowerment is also emphasized in contemporary women writers. Pupil friendships, mentoring and intergenerational relationships often bring emotional support, practical guidance and strength when dealing with the oppression of patriarchy. Women in modern novels are becoming viewed as a form of equality as well getting their man's approval rather than in competition with other women for a man's approval. The power relationships indicate examples of empowerment that can come from collective effort as well as personal success and achievement. Since gender equality is not the absence of discrimination, but rather a commitment to resolving it, these stories offer readers an opportunity to identify the value of community, empathy and mutual support as critical components for achieving gender equality (Caine, 2005).



Feminism has had an impact on modern depictions of women in literature. According to Barbara Caine (2005), there are a number of distinct stages in the development of English feminism that gave women increasing access to education, to jobs, to a voice in the political sphere, and to legal rights. Modern female authors utilise these earlier endeavours to create female protagonists who are once more victims of ongoing injustices despite much social improvement. Their novels accept that, although much has been accomplished, patriarchal ideas are still to be found in many social institutions. So literature is a means by which the struggles for equality are captured, explained and contested.

The portrayal of female identity and modernity further enriches current feminist narratives. Ardis and Lewis (2003) suggest that women's experiences of modernity entailed dramatic changes in their education, work and presence in culture and cities. The novel realizes these changes in contemporary English literature where women were experiencing the growing and changing social context in which traditional roles are emerging alongside new possibilities. Female characters may also encounter dilemmas in balancing cultural identity with contemporary pursuits, leading to ongoing negotiation processes as they build cohesive identities in evolving societies. Based on these stories, it can be said that modernity has not taken gender inequality away, but has helped women reorder their role in both personal and public life providing them with new opportunities.

The theme is about Feminism in Modern English Novels

Ideas of modern novels have greatly shaped the growing discourse about feminism, by questioning traditional notions and by representing alternative notions of women's identity that reflect the complexity of modern life. Unlike within previous literary traditions, which often marginalised woman to passive and domesticated and subordinate roles, it is now common in fiction for women characters to be intellectual, emotionally strong and socially engaged. Women authors challenge and question male-dominated notions of gender, power and identity through a range of different stories, and speak of a new vision of women's equality, autonomy and self-determination. According to feminist literary theory, literature itself is a reflection of social reality as well as an effective medium in presenting a new

image of women's role in society. Since then, modern-day English novels have been vital cultural documents which have illuminated gender disparities and proposed alternative visions of womanhood, which have inform the feminist discussion (Ledger, 2006).

A major strength of the modern novel in English is a rejection of traditional gender roles based on narrow-minded social roles ascribed to women. The stereotypical literary image of women was that of children who are dutiful, wives who are faithful, husbands to whom women are subordinate, mothers who sacrifice themselves for the children, etc. The traditional cultural picture of women as literate was one where women were only women who fulfilled their proper roles as husbands' wives, children's mothers, and women who had to work for men. These representations have been challenged by contemporary novelists, who through female characters engage in the pursuit of education, professional careers, political participation and fulfilment Goals without yielding to the expectations of the patriarchy in their choices for living. The images challenge readers to question the prevailing perception of 'femininity' and to see women as goal-driven, talented characters of their own if they are men or women. According to Sally Ledger (2006), feminist fiction has always resisted the dominant feminist discourse, revealing a woman identity beyond the sphere of the home and expanding the literary scope of women's experiences.

The preeminence of the feminist movements, which have reinforced the social attitudes concerning equality of gender, also colors the redefinition of women's identity within the modern English novels. Modern writers imagine women in complex positions of self-fashioning representing their education, their work, family relationships, sexuality and cultural expectations. These novels move away from the concept of an identity that is pre-designed by nature towards one that is a work of man, as it is a product of historical, social and personal experiences. Feminist protagonists are often objects of patriarchal institutions which attempt to impose restrictions on their conduct at the same time constructing their strategies to induce autonomy and independence from patriarchal institutions. In such stories, identity is continually reconstructed, through personal agency and social interaction, and contemporary fiction is an important forum for the



analysis of varying views of gender within the modern world (Kranidis, 2008).

The empowerment of education is a recurrent theme in the modern English literature. Women protagonists often study to gain their academic goals to obtain intellectual freedom and get out of limited social settings. Education provides women with the opportunity for questioning of patriarchal ideologies, raises their critical awareness and gives them a chance to be more active in their public lives. Contemporary novelists, on the other hand, have then used the concept of learning as a means to not only push forward with personal development; but also as a means to destroy the outdated gender constructs. Such literary images help to substantiate the argument by feminists that knowledge affords to women opportunities that would enable them to change their gender identities from being primarily domestic to anything else, and to challenge institutionally constructed inequalities that have limited the opportunities for women to attend schools and participate in professional careers (as cited in Ledger, 2006).

Contemporary novels also engage in the feminist discussion to critically analyse the institution of marriage and the inequalities of gender relations often associated with it. Previously when people wrote about marriage, many people often equated it with the fulfillment of the female feminine self, while contemporary stories doubt whether women are supposed to live merely for child-raising duties. More women are questioning and choosing relationships based on shared decision making, equality in emotion, and common respect instead of unchangeable dependence of the father to the mother. These stories do not denounce marriage, but rather invite readers to think about other notions they might have about marriage and family roles. The more balanced view of interindividuated relationships and of female autonomy that contemporary literature advocates is based on the representation of women who negotiate equality in their relationships (Kranidis, 2008).

The economic empowerment is also an important field of women empowerment in the modern English novels. Several leading women characters achieve able and ambitious careers in separate of relying on male family members or husbands while becoming financially independent and having a great deal of decision-making power. Financial independence allows women to exert

themselves against the patriarchal organization of power and to increase the chances of their self-development, because it lessens economic dependence. In modern day fiction this work thus provides employment as a practical need and as a symbol for women's equality in modern day society. The stories show progression of empowerment of women in their capacity to resist oppressive forces and be their own protagonists in economic participation, which fuels a feminist demand for equal opportunity in education, jobs and public participation (Ledger, 2006).

Feminist interpretation of contemporary English novels also gets greater benefits from the depiction of woman's solidarity. The depiction of solidarity among women also gives more value to the feasibility of the feminist novel in contemporary English. Friendships, mentorship and inter-generational relationships are becoming a major theme in the work of women writers as a source of emotional support and resistance to gender discrimination. Newer stories tend to feature women working together, rather than being in competition for the guy, in a way that celebrates their teamwork amid social problems. These relationships share knowledge with one another, help promote resilience and work together to oppose patriarchy. They can embed the feminist sentiment that social change can, and will, be made more fully by collective effort (and / or solidarity) than individual effort certainly can. As such, literature serves to bring values from community and mutual support to the process of a feminist discourse for the attainment of gender justice (Kranidis, 2008).

Another hallmark of modern feminist fiction, besides the attack on patriarchy, is the contestation of bodily control and female sexuality. These days, novelists are constantly picturing women that are acting freely no matter when it involves their own personal relationships, reproductive options, and body. These tales challenge the historic notion of female virtue as synonymous with silence, obedience and sexual restraint and reveal the different moral expectations applied to women and men. According to Elaine Jordan (2009), literary discourse on women and sexuality has echoed general cultural fears towards women's autonomy and feminization of modern society. In her literary article Elaine Jordan (2009) argued that literary text on women and sexuality has always reflected wider cultural anxieties over the female independence and social transformation. In the current novels, the authors are reacting to these



historical legacies by depicting sexuality as a part of the individual subject and not a form of control on the part of patriarchy over women. As such, literature can be powerful tool in promoting more equitable understanding of gender and personal freedoms.

Literature has continued to shape conceptions of women's identities in numerous ways, as shown in the historical evolution of feminist fiction. The idea of the "New Woman" in late-nineteenth-century literature and culture was a major reconfiguration of conceptions of feminine. In their interpretation of what women should do in society, the Victorian attitude was defied by the New Woman who represented education, ambition and personal independence in her activities (Sally Ledger, 2006). In the modern novel, written female characters perpetuate the theme of equality, identity and autonomy in an evolving social world. Despite the great strides towards gender equality that have been made in recent times in modern societies, contemporary fiction is aware that many of the quotidian attitudes are still the foundations of the experience of women. These stories continue to embody the critical perspective of feminist writing from earlier years, but also focus on today's forms of discrimination and inequalities.

In another work, John Kucich's (2007) study of sympathy and social relations in Victorian fiction, he suggests that the novel consists of a shifting notion of "social relations" between man and woman within the context of their mutual sympathy. In a study of sympathy and social relations in Victorian fiction (2007), John Kucich further argues that the novel is defined by a shifting conception of "social relations" between man and woman in the context of their mutual sympathy. Kucich's believes that literature can move readers to empathy because it can connect us with the emotional and social implications of inequality. Modern novels in English draw on this tradition by giving their audience insight into women's lived realities as they are subjected to discrimination, violence, exclusion and cultural norms. Realistic characterisation, psychological depth and the vividness of the stories create the awareness of gender injustice and lead to pondering in the reader of institutions influencing the life of women and the resulting gender inequality. The literature is not only a form of art but also a means for reflection in ethics and changes in society.

Feminist literature is also expanded in contemporary English novel since it depicts divergent female identities because of variance of class, ethnic group, culture, religion and social status. Modern writers do not tell a single universal story about women but recognise women's experiences as shaped by a range of social and historical conditions. Women are linked to social practices and institutions in multiple ways and their subjectivity cannot be separated from the others. These types of representation help to shift to a more inclusive feminist discourse that acknowledges diversity and reinforces equality and social justice. Contemporary fiction thus mirrors the dynamic of feminism as a whole, which now includes a variety of voices and a recognition of the complexities of women's experience (Ledger, 2006).

One of the noteworthy points that the modern English novels have brought is that they can readily induce the reader to have critical thinking. The literature highlights the role of women in society, shatters stereotypes and challenges existing notions and values about gender roles for women, thus prompting the reader to question inherited concepts of female identity. Women protagonists are met in each story that is brave, resilient and intellectually independent in the face of many challenges and witness how they can evolve at the level of their identities and social roles. They have both educational and literary value as they promote discussion about equality and human rights and democratic participation. In this way, contemporary fiction not only positively affects feminist scholarship, but also helps to shape the conversations about justice and inclusion in the broader culture (Jordan, 2009).

Modern English novels have become integral in promoting feminist discourse by breaking gender stereotypes and new thought of women's identity in the modern society. In examining education, economic independence, sexuality, family relations, professional success and personal autonomy, the works make women protagonists of their lives instead of merely recipients of men's authority. They continue the themes of previously written feminist work and tackle current social issues, proving that literature is an effective tool of challenging inequality and pursuing social change. Together, today's women authors have created a new arena in English fiction which will continue to develop and refine feminist ideas and allow readers to appreciate the differences, strengths and resilience of women's



lives in the 21st century (Jordan, 2009; Kranidis, 2008; Kucich, 2007; Ledger, 2006).

CONCLUSION

Recent novels in English have influenced the depiction of women, of how women are in some ways represented differently and in others more subtly, and the stereotypes that have clearly been broken down. From the lens of feminist literary theory, this study has revealed that women writers in the modern period depict female figures as being self-dependent, strong, with greater intellectual strength, and making active tentative efforts in dealing with patriarchy's social fabric. The themes of gender, agency, identity, resistance and empowerment are pervasively woven through these stories reflecting the diversity of women's experiences in modern society. In contrast to these

traditional notions, modern literature prompts critical thinking about such topics as equality, justice and personal freedom, while also asserting women's right to define themselves and to engage in life of the outside world. These pieces of literature make it apparent that women's identities are in a state of flux—exemplifying the ways they can develop as they learn, earn, relate, and rebel against gender oppression and stereotypes. In addition, the novels of today continue to engage in the overall feminist debate by raising consciousness of the ongoing gender discrepancy and sparking discussion for change. They do not just mirror shifting and changing attitudes of society as regards the role of women but also shape the readers' perceptions by fostering alternative models of womanhood which are grounded in concepts of dignity, independence, and equality.

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