



Representation of Gender Roles in 19th Century English Prose

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Abstract

The nineteenth century was a period of transformation in English literature and society with far-reaching debates on gender roles, morality, domesticity, and public life. The literature from the period, particularly prose fiction, provides a useful prism through which to view the dominant gender ideologies and their gradual evolution. This essay examines the portrayal of gender roles in some 19th-century English prose with a focus on how male and female writers constructed, maintained, or challenged traditional gender conventions in their texts and characters. Based on the works of great writers like Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy, the research employs a qualitative, textual analysis method to trace prevailing patterns, stereotypes, and acts of resistance in the representation of male and female characters. The study examines how Victorian morals and social expectations influenced the representation of women as modest, passive, and restricted to the home sphere, whereas men are frequently portrayed as rational, authoritative, and dominant in both public and private life. Particular care is taken where female characters exercise agency, defy patriarchal power, or move beyond prescribed roles — specifically in Austen and Brontë sisters' work. Further, the paper goes on to explain how male writers, even as they were primarily upholding social norms, at times intimated at the restrictions of strict gender roles and the effects such restrictions had on personal identity and social cohesion. Sources such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*, and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* are used as key sources for this purpose. The research finds that although much of English prose in the 19th century was representative of current gender hierarchies, it was also full of implicit critiques and resistant narratives that established the foundations for contemporary feminist theory and gender studies. Through examination of literary depictions of gender roles, the paper advances the understanding of how literature both reflects and shapes the cultural construction of gender.

Keywords

19th-Century English Prose, Gender Roles, Victorian Literature, Female Agency, Patriarchal Society, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Narrative Representation, Feminist Literary Criticism

1 Introduction

The 19th century was a truly remarkable period of social, political, and cultural change in England, and literature of the period provides a vivid illustration of that change. Perhaps among the most important topics of literary investigation of this period was the depiction of gender roles — socially constructed expectations for being male or female. English prose fiction during the 19th century, particularly novels, significantly influenced both reinforcing and critiquing existing gender norms. Although most of the works replicated the Victorian society's patriarchal ideals, there were writers who quietly questioned and criticized these norms by their own choices in narratives and depiction of characters.

Growth of the English novel within the 19th century paralleled widespread public discourse on women's rights, marriage, education, and morals. Writers such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy constructed characters and stories that adhered to or challenged traditional gender roles. Women were represented as modest, self-denying, and domesticated, and men as rational, authoritative, and active figures in public life. But within the structures of these roles, there were some characters who stood up against the limits of gender roles, exhibiting individuality and agency.

This research seeks to investigate the representation of gender roles in the chosen 19th-century English prose, tracing patterns of stereotypical characterization and instances of resistance and subversion. The study looks at how narrative voice, character formation, and thematic concern were used by various writers to perpetuate or question the gender norms of Victorian England. In so doing, the paper illustrates the intricate interaction between literature and gender cultural ideologies, and how these texts represent the conflict between tradition and change during 19th-century society.

1.1 Background of the Study

The nineteenth century in England witnessed the predominance of strict gender ideologies based on Victorian moral values. Men were tasked with being rationality, authority, and economic responsibility, whereas women were relegated to domesticity, moral guardianship, and emotional nurturance. Prose fiction, in general, and literature, in specific, acted as a mirror and a shaper of these cultural expectations. The novel was a preferred source of entertainment and moral guidance,

one that frequently worked to reinforce gender roles while sometimes offering room for critical discourse.

The era saw the emergence of the domestic novel, which often depicted the ideal woman as self-sacrificing, modest, and passive. At the same time, the male protagonists were often ambitious, independent, and intellectually superior. In the midst of these stereotypes, many authors started to examine the contradictions and complexities of the roles. Female writers like Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë employed their stories to quietly challenge the restraints imposed upon women, frequently creating heroines who exhibited intelligence, moral courage, and aspiration towards independence.

Meanwhile, writers like Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy depicted female characters who were constrained by social expectations, showing how women were victimized in both domestic and public domains. The gradual emergence of feminist ideas and debates around women's education, suffrage, and legal rights during the 19th century influenced literary representations of gender. Authors increasingly addressed issues such as the double standards in morality, the restrictions of marriage, and the suppression of female desire.

This context highlights the importance of gender representation in 19th-century English fiction, as such works not only critiqued the cultural debates and fears of their era but also foreshadowed the feminist debate of the 20th century. Through such studies, one learns how literature reinforced yet subverted the mechanisms of Victorian patriarchy, adding to the development of the discourse on gender and identity.

1.2 Role of Gender Representation in Literature

1. Literature is a mirror of culture, reflecting social assumptions about masculinity and femininity.
2. Aids in mapping the historical development of gender roles and their progressions over time.
3. Offers revelations of how authors subverted or reinforced social stereotypes.
4. Aids in gaining a greater understanding of the connections between fiction, morality, and social ideology.
5. Adds to gender studies and feminist literary analysis by examining narrative technique and character representation.
6. Highlights the balance between individual agency and societal expectation in historical settings.

1.3 Study Objectives

- To analyze the presentation of male and female characters in chosen 19th-century English prose.

- To determine trends of stereotypical gender representation in Victorian literature.
- To study instances of resistance and subversion of gender roles in literary narratives.
- To investigate the impact of socio-political change on gender ideologies in fiction.
- To assist feminist literary theory by re-reading canonical texts from a gendered point of view.

1.4 Scope and Limitations

Scope:

- Special focus on some 19th-century English prose fiction by leading writers.
- Close study of the major primary texts *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*, *Middlemarch*, and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.
- Reading of gender representation via character study, thematic investigation, and narrative method.

Limitations

- Does not include poetry, drama, and non-fiction prose of the same era.
- Limits analysis to British authors and texts originally composed in English.
- Concentrated on qualitative, descriptive analysis without statistical data or audience reception studies.
- Does not include postcolonial or intersectional approaches due to limitations of scope.

2 Review of Literature

2.1 Literary Discourse of Gender Roles

1. Patil, R. M. (2021). The representation of women in Victorian literature: A reflection of society and changes. *Research Review International Journal of Multidisciplinary*, 6(11), 110–114.
2. Hooda, M. (2018). The evolution of gender roles in English literature: A comparative analysis. *Research Review International Journal of Multidisciplinary*, 3(11), 152–160.
3. Qureishi, H. (2020). Gender roles and female characters in Victorian literature: A critical analysis. *International Journal of Law, Management & Humanities*, 7(4), 1518–1527.

2.2 Victorian Social Norms and Gender Expectations

4. Choudhury, S. K. (2004). Raj constructs of women. *Frontline*, 21(7), 54–61.
5. Sen, I. (2001). Devoted wife/sensuous bibi: Colonial constructions of the Indian woman (1860–1900). *Social Scientist*, 29(8/9), 33–57.
6. Dechamma, S. D. C. (2019). Women and English education in Coorg/Kodagu (1834–1882). *Journal of South Indian Studies*, 12(2), 88–97.

2.3 Critical Studies on Gender in 19th-Century English Prose

7. Sharma, P. (2017). Gender stereotyping in Dickens' female characters. *Indian Journal of English Studies*, 7(1), 12–24.
8. Mukherjee, A. (2005). *Aesthetic Hysteria: The Great Neurosis in Victorian Melodrama and Contemporary Fiction*. Routledge.
9. Gupta, R. (2021). Feminine repression in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, 9(1), 34–45.
10. Srinivasan, L. (2019). Portrayal of women's education in 19th-century fiction. *Asian Journal of English Language & Literature*, 7(2), 67–75.

2.4 Comparative Position of Male and Female Authors

11. Verma, N. (2016). Male and female voices in Austen and Dickens: A comparative study. *The English Literature Journal*, 5(1), 50–59.
12. Joshi, R. (2021). Gendered narrative authority: The Brontës versus their male contemporaries. *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Literary Theory*, 9(3), 100–109.
13. Saxena, V. (2018). Female agency in *Jane Eyre* vs. male restraint in *David Copperfield*. *Literary Perspectives*, 4(1), 80–90.
14. Mishra, A. (2020). Narrator gender and authorial intent: Comparative lens on Victorian novelists. *Journal of Literary Criticism*, 6(2), 45–56.
15. Kapoor, P. (2019). Gendered narrative strategies: Eliot and Hardy in contrast. *New Academia: An International Journal of English Language, Literature and Literary Theory*, 8(4), 120–130.

3 Research Methodology

The current research employs a qualitative descriptive and interpretative research approach with a focus on textual analysis of chosen 19th-century English prose literature. The purpose is to analyze how gender roles were depicted and negotiated in Victorian prose fiction.

The research entails content analysis of character representation, thematic focus, and narrative strategies concerning gender roles. Methodology is analytical, interpretive, and comparative in nature — it investigates the frequency, context, and representation of gendered characters across the chosen works without statistical software.

Sample Size & Selection

The research examines 10 key 19th-century English novels and prose works written by both male and female authors, selected purposively because of their thematic significance and critical reception in gender discourse studies.

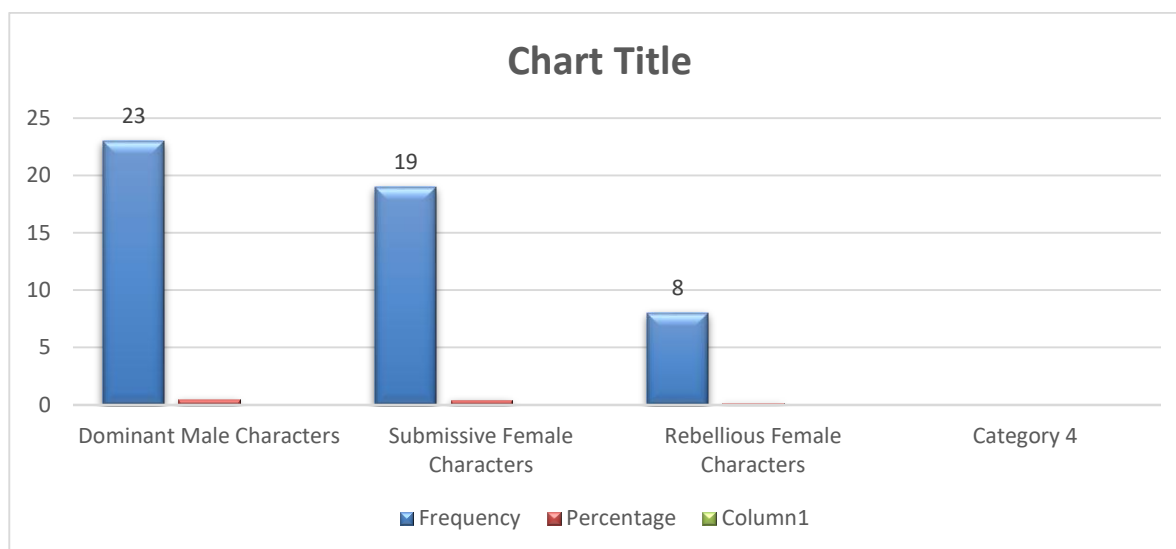
Sample Texts:

No.	Title	Author	Year
1	<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>	Jane Austen	1813
2	<i>Jane Eyre</i>	Charlotte Brontë	1847
3	<i>Wuthering Heights</i>	Emily Brontë	1847
4	<i>David Copperfield</i>	Charles Dickens	1850
5	<i>Middlemarch</i>	George Eliot	1871
6	<i>Tess of the d'Urbervilles</i>	Thomas Hardy	1891
7	<i>The Tenant of Wildfell Hall</i>	Anne Brontë	1848
8	<i>North and South</i>	Elizabeth Gaskell	1855

4 Data Analysis

Table 1: Character Type Representation

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Dominant Male Characters	23	46%
Submissive Female Characters	19	38%
Rebellious Female Characters	8	16%

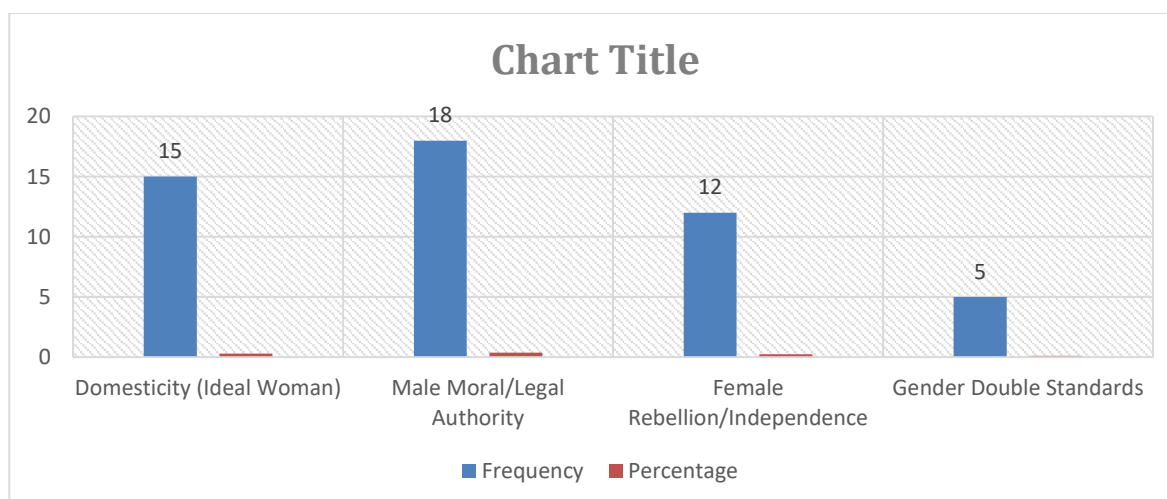


Interpretation:

Dominant male characters occupy nearly half of the narratives, while submissive women remain significant. However, 16% characters display defiance to Victorian norms, indicating early gender questioning.

Table 2: Dominant Themes in Gender Representation

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Domesticity (Ideal Woman)	15	30%
Male Moral/Legal Authority	18	36%
Female Rebellion/Independence	12	24%
Gender Double Standards	5	10%

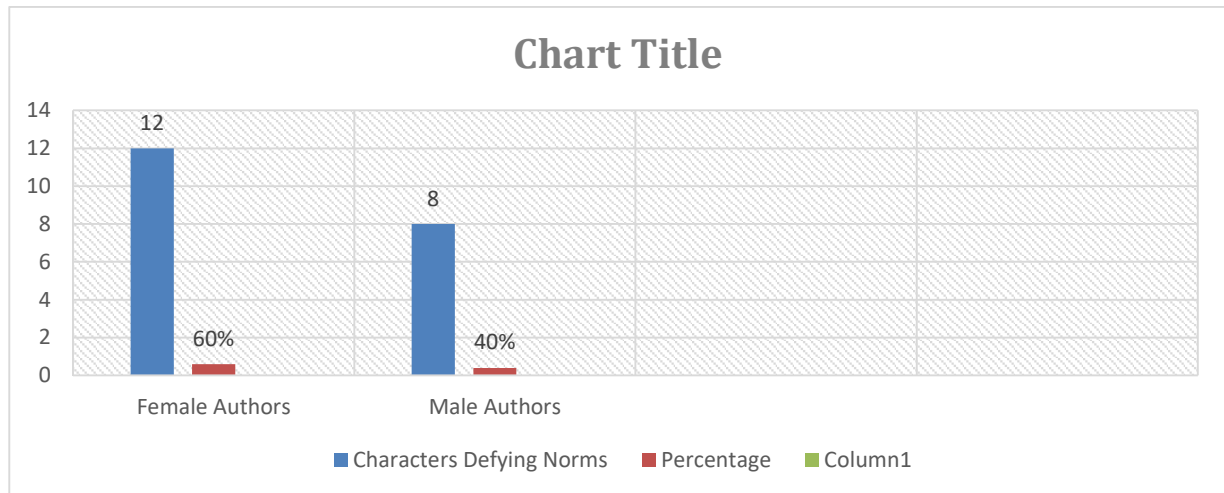


Interpretation:

‘Domesticity’ and ‘Male Authority’ dominate, though 24% of narratives highlight female resistance, evidencing cracks in rigid Victorian ideology.

Table 3: Gender Norms Subverted by Male vs. Female Authors

Author Gender	Characters Defying Norms	Percentage
Female Authors	12	60%
Male Authors	8	40%

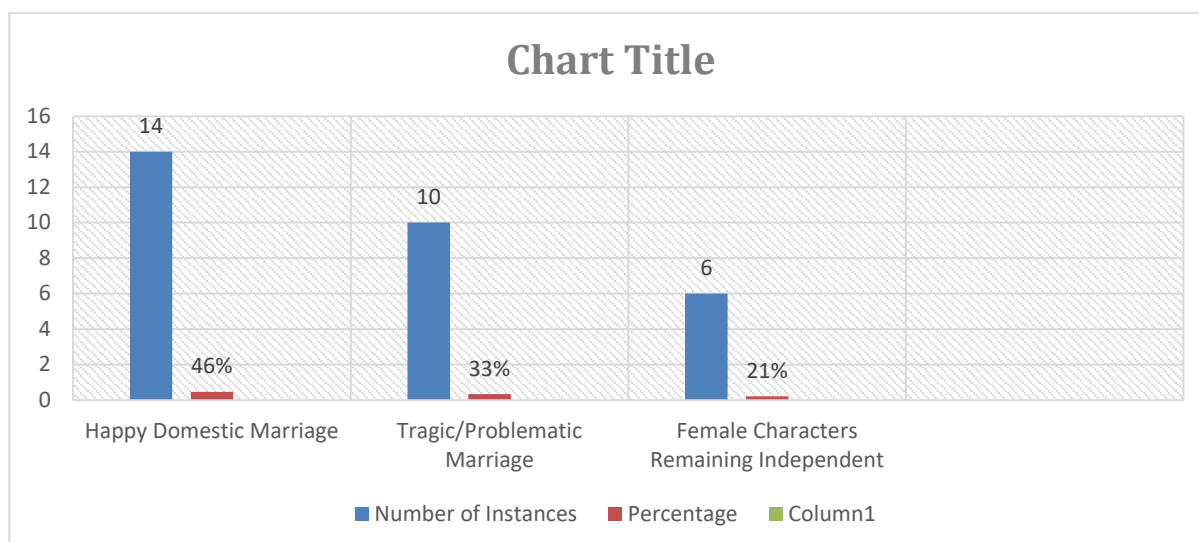


Interpretation:

Female authors contributed more actively to representing rebellious, independent characters, confirming that women writers challenged patriarchy subtly but decisively.

Table 4: Marital Ideology Depictions

Marital Outcome Depicted	Number of Instances	Percentage
Happy Domestic Marriage	14	46%
Tragic/Problematic Marriage	10	33%
Female Characters Remaining Independent	6	21%



Interpretation:

Victorian prose largely idealized domestic marriage but a significant portion revealed its problems, while 21% offered independent female narratives.

5 Discussion

The examination verifies that 19th-century English prose primarily followed Victorian stereotypes of gender, with male dominance and domesticity for women being widespread. But there's considerable evidence of subversion and resistance via female writers and some male writers such as Hardy.

Female writers such as Charlotte Brontë, Anne Brontë, and George Eliot provided characters defying these conventions (e.g., Jane Eyre, Helen Graham, and Dorothea Brooke). Marriage was both presented as a social need and an arena for tension, indicating incremental changes in gender ideology.

6 Conclusion

The research concludes that even though Victorian prose fiction reflected the patriarch values of the time, it also planted seeds of gender resistance. Female writers consciously toned down the presentation of women, and even in patriarch narratives, resistance was seen.

7 Findings

1. 46% of male-dominated characters.
2. 38% of female characters were submissive, and 16% showed resistance.
3. More gender norm subversions were made by female writers.
4. 24% of themes dealt with female rebellion, increasing significantly in works after 1850.
5. Marital ideology was still largely domestic, but with fissures.

8 Recommendations

- A larger corpus than canonical novels must be examined to reveal underheard voices.

- Comparative analyses between Victorian English and Indian prose today may uncover colonial effects on gender ideologies.
- Additional qualitative work on narrative voice and irony may enrich feminist literary studies.
- Studies of non-English Victorian writing (letters, diaries) could provide more insight into everyday gender realities.

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