

# Evolution of Feminism in English Literature From 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts in English

Department of English and Humanities  
BRAC University  
January 2022

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3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I/We have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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## Approval

The thesis/project titled “Evolution of Feminism in English Literature From 19th to 20th century” submitted by Zarin Tasnim Promee (16103019) of Fall, 2021 has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English on 17<sup>th</sup> January 2022.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis will be concerned with the evolution of feminism in English literature from the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century. Feminism encompasses social movements, political movements and ideologies that aim to define and create social, political and economic equality of sexes. There were waves of feminist movements during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century and women's position and roles in the literature also developed as it developed in society. For my thesis, I will examine *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman as literature from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf and *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath as literature from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will use the feminist theory to analyze how the writers portrayed the female characters in their works and how the roles of women developed throughout the centuries in literature alongside society.

**Keywords:** Feminism; English literature from 19<sup>th</sup> century; English literature from 20<sup>th</sup> century; women in society.

## **Acknowledgement**

I'm grateful to Allah for giving me the patience and strength to finish writing this thesis when I felt like I would not be able to do it. My sincere gratitude goes to my supervisor lecturer Ms. Seema Nusrat Amin. I was able to complete this because of her guidance and valuable comments. I would really like to thank my friends for being the best support system anyone could ever have and for encouraging me and having faith in me. Last but not the least, I want to give thanks to Chanyeol for being an inspiration to me to keep going on no matter what.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

This thesis will be focused on the evolution of feminism in English literature from the 19th to 20th century. Feminism encompasses social movements, political movements and ideologies that aim to define and create social, political and economic equality of sexes. There were waves of feminist movements during the 19th and 20th century and women's position and roles in the literature also developed as it developed in society. According to the Oxford dictionary, the word feminism can be defined as "the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes" (292). Feminism not only establishes women's rights but also proves that such rights are equal to men. It is the view that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities in all areas, and there should be organized work to support women's rights and their interests should be considered. Despite all the disagreements regarding how this equal distribution of rights should be achieved, everyone agreed that feminism always addressed contested gender relationships and the difficulties of achieving autonomy and a safe space for women. Several feminist movements arose, with different priorities in different countries and communities. As women fought for their equal rights and opportunities and it can also be perceived in certain literary works during the period of the feminist movements.

From the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women across Britain began to fight for their rights and independence, with the goal to have equal opportunities for education, employment, and life as men. As a result of feminist movements, the concept and image of independent women have changed over time. Martin Luther (1832) described the typical roles of a woman from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as "Women should remain at home, sit still, keep house, and bear and bring up children. A woman is, or at least should be, a



friendly, courteous, and a merry companion in life, the honour and ornament of the house, and inclined to tenderness, for there unto are they chiefly created, to bear children, and to be the pleasure, joy and solace of their husbands” (33,34). However, the perception of an independent woman soon changed to a woman who does not need a man to be happy and can choose whatever occupation she wants as women became more aware of their rights in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The thesis will introduce four writers and their notable feminist works and explore the progression of feminism in English literature from the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century through their writing. The writers that I will look into will be Charlotte Brontë, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath. The works of these writers that will be analyzed are the novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, “The Yellow Wallpaper” a short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, novel *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf and *The Bell Jar* a novel written by Sylvia Plath. I will be discussing the effect first and second waves of feminism had on these literary works from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. I will also explore how these fictions allude to the reality of women’s position in the society of that time.

### **1.1 A Brief Historical Background of the Feminist Movements**

Women across Britain and France were the first ones to fight for their rights, education, and, above all, respect. According to Simone de Beauvoir, “the first time we see a woman take up her pen in defence of her sex was when Christine de Pizan wrote *Epitre au Dieud'Amour* (Epistle to the God of Love) in the 15<sup>th</sup> century”. Although, it was not until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century that women started to achieve changes in society. The feminism movements have been divided into three separate waves by scholars and feminists and each of the movements is important for reaching different goals.

The first wave of the feminist movement refers to the women's suffrage campaign in the United Kingdom and the United States throughout the 19th and early 20th century, with a focus on women acquiring the right to vote. Initially, the first wave concentrated on promoting women's equality and property rights, as well as opposing chattel marriage and husbands' having ownership of married women and their children. Margaret Waters wrote about the condition of women in the book called *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*, “for a married woman, her home becomes a prison-house. The house itself, as well as everything in it, belongs to the husband, and of all fixtures the most abject is his breeding machine, the wife. Married women are in fact slaves, their situation no better than that of Negroes in the West Indies” (44). During that time, women were treated similar to servants, with few rights and possessions. Moreover, In the essay *A Plea for Women* (1843), Marion Reid argues “if women’s rights are not the same as those of man, what are they?” in a manner, she acknowledges that, “woman was made for man, yet in another and higher she was also made for herself” (42). She emphasizes that women ought not to be confined only to domestic life, and mentions that caring for the home and children should be in both the wife's and husband's best interests. Her essay has been called the most comprehensive and persuasive statement made by a woman since Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Many female writers and feminists claimed that what they required was the acknowledgment of what women need to fulfill their potential and their individual natures, not just equality. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf argues about how women’s talents have been wasted. Supporting her argument Walter makes a remark on it: “She contemplates a number of greatly talented women from the past, from the Duchess of Newcastle to George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë – who were deprived of experience, intercourse and travel and that is the reason they never wrote quite as powerfully and generously as they might have. Woolf also reasoned that a woman need money and a room of her own to be able to write” (96).

Nonetheless, well-planned campaigns and movements for women's rights did not emerge until the second half of the nineteenth century, in order to advance women's educational prospects, opportunities to work outside the house, and reform of legislation affecting married women, as well as the right to vote for the first time. The Ladies of Langham Palace was one of the first female organizations, and it was directed by Barbara Leigh Smith. Many campaigns were started by the group around problems that were already well-defined like “women’s urgent need for better education and for increased possibilities of employment, as well as the improvement of the legal position of married women” (56). Leigh Smith also addressed the issue of marital arrangements in her pamphlets published in 1854, because a woman would lose all of her belongings as soon as she got married during the time. Towards the end of the 19th century, the movement was primarily focused on gaining political power, particularly the right of women's suffrage. Suffragettes and, perhaps more efficiently.

Women's suffrage was advocated by suffragists in the United Kingdom. It was considered crucial as a sign of society's acceptance of women in addition to being a means of improving women's lives. Many attempts were made at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to pass suffrage for women, but it was never passed by the parliament with the argument that if women had much power in Parliament, it would lead to "hasty alliances with scheming neighbours, more class cries, permissive legislation, domestic perplexities, and sentimental grievances" (73) as Walters suggested. Despite the fact that suffragettes did not have many successes during the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, they still persevered.

The second wave of feminism began after World War II, it happened all across the Western world and the goals were to achieve legal and social equality for women, as well as to eliminate inequality. This period was also considered as a continuation of feminism's first wave; in fact, it was after the second wave happened that the phrase "first wave" was coined. A new term was required because the second wave had a slightly different purpose. Women's

cultural and political disparities were seen by second-wave feminists to be linked to each other and they urged women to see aspects of their personal lives as fundamentally politicized and reflecting sexist power structures. Simone de Beauvoir is one of the most influential feminists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century who distinguishes sex from gender through her statement that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (35) as mentioned by Judith Butler in her article “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*”. De Beauvoir advocates that gender is an aspect of identity that is gradually acquired. According to her gender is “the cultural meaning and form that body acquires, the variable modes of that body’s acculturation” (35). The distinction between the first wave and this movement was that this time the groups were significantly smaller. The women were mostly interested in talking about particular topics, exchanging personal experiences, and identifying what they had in common as women. They continued to try to communicate a better social position in society, and feminist movements of the time expressed their demands for equal education and salary, as well as free contraception and abortion if necessary.

The third wave of feminism, often known as post-feminism, began in the 1990s and continues to this day. Post-feminism focuses on second-wave feminism's perceived failings, and it continues to fight for the same principles as earlier waves. However, the movement's goal has altered slightly, with a greater emphasis on the individual self rather than governmental processes and rules. The feminist movements that occurred over the decades have aided women in standing up for themselves and being recognized in society.

## Chapter 2

### Research Questions and Methodology

#### 2.1

How did feminism develop in English literature from the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century? How was the women's position in society depicted in literature? Did the first and second waves of feminism create a shift in the way women's roles and positions were portrayed in literature from the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century? How did the writers highlight the issues women faced in society through their literature? And finally, how were the literary works of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries affected by the first and second waves of feminism?

#### 2.2

I am mainly focusing on the changes in women's position in society as a result of the feminist movements and how their depiction in English literature developed from the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century. I hope to investigate the aforementioned questions in my paper. In order to investigate such topics, I will use qualitative comparative research methods, which will include selected text and article analysis. My primary sources will be the novels - *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath and the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and I will also use different articles and several writer's views for writing this thesis.

## Chapter 3

### Literature Review

Feminism encompasses social movements, political movements and ideologies that aim to define and create social, political and economic equality of sexes. *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman are literature written in the 19th century which is known as the Victorian period in literature. In the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century women were not considered equal to men. They did not have the right to vote or even own any property. However, during the 19th century and early 20th century first wave of feminism occurred where women in England and in America started to fight for their rights on education, paid work and politics. Meanwhile, the 20th century was the period of modernist literature and also the second wave of feminism occurred in this century after the second world war ended. *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf and *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath are literary works from the 20th century. The effects of the feminist movements could be seen in the works of writers from the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The first wave of feminist movement refers to the women's suffrage campaign in the United Kingdom and the United States in the 19th and early 20th centuries, with the focus on women acquiring the right to vote. Initially, the first wave concentrated on promoting women's equality and property rights, as well as opposing chattel marriage and husbands' having ownership of married women and their children. Margaret Walters mentions this in her book called *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction* (2005), “for a married woman, her home becomes a prison-house. The house itself, as well as everything in it, belongs to the husband, and of all fixtures the most abject is his breeding machine, the wife. Married women are in fact slaves, their situation no better than that of Negroes in the West Indies” (44). Because of the problems that Victorian women faced, the solutions were sought in the forms

of events, legislations and the publications of some essays and novels. Ignatius Nsaidzedze in the article titled “An Overview of Feminism in the Victorian Period [1832-1901]” (2017) mentions that *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë which was published in 1847 was the first Victorian feminist novel and it was a very important literary work in Victorian Feminism (3). As women began fighting for their rights and independence, the perception of independent women also changed. It evolved from a woman who is expected to be a wife, mother, and household caretaker to a woman who does not require a man to be happy and can pursue whatever profession she desires. Therefore, the main feminist trend in Victorian literature was the representation of the “New-Woman” regardless of it being written by men or women. The word new woman was coined by Sarah Grand in 1884 while a French Socialist Charles Fourier invented the word feminist as he imagined a “New-Woman” who would change her society and also be changed by that society. “New-Woman” is depicted well through the protagonist in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and it has even been described as a declaration of women’s rights. The novel expresses women’s rebellion against the limitation of her rights in it. The protagonist Jane is a tough independent woman who pursues true love and equality. Her characteristics are different from the women of her time as she fights for her own rights and love. She protests against the injustices against women similar to the women of the Victorian period during the first feminist movement. *Jane Eyre* was a representative work of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that reflects women’s calls for equality. Zheng Kelu discussed in “Charlotte’s Feminist Declaration” (1999) that “During the Victorian Age was men-centered and men-controlled times. Women were discriminated against by men at that time. However, the ahead-of-age female consciousness of Jane Eyre, the main character challenges men’s authority” (167).

Next, in “The Yellow Wallpaper”, author Charlotte Perkins Gilman expressed how women were treated by a male authority in the household and in the society through the

protagonist of the story. The protagonist is supposed to be subservient but she is a headstrong character. The story can be treated as a text that portrays the development of the consciousness of a woman who lived in a male-dominated society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The narrator realizes the oppression and pressure she's experiencing and she breaks the norms and turns into a conscious woman who knows what she wants and becomes free from all limitations. Susan S. Lanser in her article "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' and the Politics of Color in America" (1989) mentions how in the contemporary feminist reading, the sexual oppression is evident from the phrase "John says" and the prescriptions that keep the narrator immobilized, infantilized and bored out of her mind. "Reading or writing her self upon the wallpaper allows the narrator, as Paula Treichler puts it, to 'escape' her husband's 'sentence' and to achieve the limited freedom of madness which, virtually all these critics have agreed, constitutes a kind of sanity in the face of the insanity of male dominance" (418). Also Ghandeharion and Mazari in their article "Women Entrapment and Flight in Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" (2016) discusses the sexist gender roles in the story and their inhibiting nature repressing women -"the narrator is confined in a room resembling a prison—are represented by the pattern of the wallpaper in which there is a front pattern, implying the bars of a prison constructed by the society in which women are confined, and a sub-pattern resembling the body of a woman trying to escape, which embodies all the women restricted by the rules and regulations of a patriarchy" (114).

After World war II, the second wave of feminism emerged during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. This movement focused on issues of legal and social inequalities that women faced and also their reproductive rights and sexuality. Simone de Beauvoir who was one of the most influential feminists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; in her book *The Second Sex* (1949), differentiates sex from gender and maintains that gender is "an aspect of identity gradually acquired. She states that gender is the cultural meaning and form that body acquires, the



variable modes of that body's acculturation" (20). The issue of sexuality is presented in *Mrs. Dalloway*, is considered as one of Virginia Woolf's best-written novels and it was published in 1925. The novel is set in post-First World War England and it tells the story of Clarissa Dalloway who is a high-society woman. The story focuses on the events of a day in Clarissa's life when she attempts to organize a party. The story also goes back to the past at times and puts visions from past and present together that depicts Clarissa's life and the post-war social structure. The novel deals with the question of searching for self, as James Schiff states in his article "Rewriting Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*: Homage, Sexual Identity, and the Single-Day Novel by Cunningham, Lippincott, and Lanchester" (2004) that "Mrs. Dalloway is about what it feels like to be alive—to be a self passing through the moments and hours of a day" (364). The novel also deals with the uncertainty of sexual identity and desire, which was prevalent at the time it was written. During that time there was a shift in public attitude towards sexual orientation as an effect of the second wave of feminism. The author depicts Clarissa's loneliness and anguish which she feels because of her sexual inhibition and conformity to social conventions. Clarissa feels frustrated as she does not want to recognize her affection towards Sally but she still cannot forget her kiss with Sally. Woolf reacts to the prejudice society hold towards lesbian relationships by showing the romantic friendship between Clarissa and Sally. The importance of independence in a relationship for women is shown through Clarissa who rejected to marry Peter even though she was in love with her. Peter is portrayed as a typical male dictator of the society who thinks that he can dictate how Clarissa should live her life, this leads to Clarissa rejecting to marry him because she was afraid that Peter would restrict her freedom. "Clarissa rejected Peter because his love was too possessive and domineering while Richard's is not. In her decision to marry Richard, she chose privacy over passion" (Shihada 129). Woolf in her novel portrayed her female characters in conflict with society and criticized the difference in gender roles in society.

Next, *The Bell Jar* is written by Sylvia Plath and was released in 1963. This was during the period when the second wave of feminism emerged. The novel can be considered as a feminist classic as it depicts the struggle that the main character, Esther Greenwood, goes through as she struggles with love, parenting, and the ideal picture of women presented to her by the magazine internship she works at. Rachel Blau Duplessis in her essay “Breaking the Sentence; Breaking the Sequence” (2005) states that a female writer has to find her own voice and they can break the sentence by tempering with the voices of dominance. She explains that women can break the sentence by not rejecting grammar but rhythm, pace, flow and expression instead. They also must reject the “structuring of the female voice by the male voice, female tone and manner by male expectations, female writing by male emphasis, female writing by existing conventions of gender—in short, any way in which dominant structures shape muted ones” (222). This implementation of breaking the sentence can be found in Plath’s writing style in the novel. She attempts to write in the feminine. Her novel is more than just a collection of particularly female experiences centered on a female topic. As E. Miller Budick in the article “The Feminist Discourse of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*” (1987) argues that Plath created a literary form that “simultaneously reflects the inherent femininity of a woman's experience and then transforms that reflection from a static, potentially suffocating presentation of archetypes or traditional images of femaleness into a dynamic process of feminist discourse” (873). Plath also shows the entrapment that women felt during the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to the strict ideals imposed upon them by society in her novel. In the article “Marriage and the Exploitation of Women: A Case-Study of *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath” (2019) it is stated that, “Plath, through her protagonist Esther Greenwood who has been disillusioned of these mistreated restrictive patterns of society, asserts that marriage is a tactic for female exploitation. It has not been designed to guard women. It has been designed to subjugate their freedom and to entrap them in domestic life” (Imtiaz et al. 50). Esther

unravels at the thought of spending the rest of her life trying to be the perfect partner and cater to a man. She's also not keen on the idea of motherhood and is not sure if that is what she wants in life. She constantly struggles with the idealized image of women that is promoted by society. Esther victimized herself as a way to free herself from this oppression and it eventually led her towards depression.

## **Chapter 4**

### **19<sup>th</sup> Century Literature**

The literary works from the 19<sup>th</sup> century that I'll be discussing are the novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and "The Yellow Wallpaper" a short story written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855), the eldest of three Brontë sisters, was a British author and poet. Her mother passed away because of cancer when she was five years old. Brontë and her siblings were raised by her aunt. Charlotte and her siblings went to a Clergy Daughter's School to receive an education, but the school's poor conditions had a harmed Charlotte's physical and mental development, which was later reflected in *Jane Eyre*. After returning home from school, Charlotte took on the role of mother and guardian to her sisters and brother as the oldest sibling. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was an American novelist, poet, short stories, and nonfiction writer. She was a utopian feminist and she acted as a role model for subsequent generations of feminists because of her unconventional ideas and lifestyle. Her semi-autobiographical short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," which she penned following a severe case of postpartum psychosis, is her most well-known work today.

## 4.1 Jane Eyre

*Jane Eyre* is a coming-of-age novel written by Charlotte Brontë and first published in 1847 under the pen name Currer Bell which is a male pseudonym. Brontë tackles social concerns such as misogyny, religious hypocrisy and class prejudice through Jane's life and experiences. Many literary critics and biographers, including Brontë's friend and fellow novelist Elizabeth Gaskell, have drawn many parallels between the events of the novel and Brontë's personal experiences. *Jane Eyre* is written in the first-person narrative where the protagonist Jane is an orphan who lived with her maternal uncle's family where she was seen as a burden and mistreated by her aunt and her cousins. The novel charts Jane's growth as she matures and becomes a strong, independent woman. Despite the struggles she faced in her childhood, she strives for her life and develops a strong persona. Her childhood environment teaches her how to live and shapes her strong personality, beautiful ideal, and wisdom in addition to her developing experiences. Brontë developed Jane's character as a tough and independent woman who pursues true love and equality. *Jane Eyre* is a unique photograph that stands out from the crowd. Her character is unlike any other woman in her time period. She strives for her life and defends her fate in the face of adversity. *Jane Eyre's* appearance stood in stark contrast to the male-dominated culture of the Victorian era. She represents a new generation of women who have the confidence to speak up for their own rights and love. She consistently maintains her self-respect despite the pressures of life by hard work, intelligence, and rugged individualism. On her way, she never gives up and the Rochester is drawn to her because of her generosity, intelligence, and independence. *Jane Eyre* aspires for dignity and respect, and her progress can be perceived throughout the novel. Jane describes herself as "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will" (*Eyre* 216). Since the novel was inspired by the author's own life and it

also reflected modern attitudes toward women's roles in society, it is considered to be quite significant during the time it was written. Jane has always been strong, but her maturing throughout the narrative allows her to cope with life's dreadful conditions more easily. She was able to contain herself when she came to know that Mr. Rochester who she loved was already married. Despite the fact that she felt dejected and betrayed after leaving Mr. Rochester, and although her grief was unbearable, she still managed to break away. Jane was not a believer of her life being complete only after she gets married, which is why she could leave Mr. Rochester regardless of her love for him. She maintained her self-respect and distanced herself. She remained strong and independent as she continued working as an instructor and governess, which was no better than being a servant. Haiyan Gao discusses this in "Reflection on Feminism in Jane Eyre" that,

Charlotte Bronte depicts Jane Eyre's image through three steps. The first step is her feminism thought starts to sprout from her fighting to her poor child life. The second step is her feminism thought shapes from the miserable experiences in boarding school, where she comes to understand that the survival of the fittest. The impressive part is the third step of her pursuit for true love, independence and equality, where the feminism thought grows to mature. The growth of Jane Eyre mirrors the growing up of Charlotte Bronte. (930)

Jane fights for her identity and emphasizes that she is not a "machine". She reiterates that she will not act in accordance with traditions, but rather on her own free will, through this Brontë addresses the issues of sexual inequality in society. Despite the fact that Jane fell in love and accepted the idea of being loved, Brontë portrayed Jane as a strong woman who will not compromise her morals or dignity for any guy. This is a woman's endeavor to break free from the constraints and expectations that have been imposed upon her by society. Nothing, not

even love, money, or prestige, can change Jane's values. The following quote exemplifies this.

Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automation? —a machine without feelings? and can you bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips and my drop of living water dashed from my cup? Do you think because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soul and heartless? You think wrong! — I have as much soul as you, —and full as much heart ... I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh; — it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal, —as we are! (215, 216).

When addressing the unfairness and limitations of women's roles in society, Brontë gave her protagonist a prominent voice. In the Victorian age, men were treated as superior to women. Jane constantly fights for her equal rights as she said:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags (93).

This quotation indicates how she felt about the inequality and limitations that women faced in society. Jane takes on the job of a governess and she continuously fights for equality as a basic right, the aforementioned quote captures Jane's determination and perseverance in her

quest for self-realization as a firm and independent woman. Charlotte Brontë focused on the female character who is simple but she sought fulfillment in her life and focused on living her life according to her own principle. Jane, together with the author, is not reliant on a guy to make her feel worthy; she rather derives her self-worth from her intellect and willpower. She focused on living a life according to her own norms, emphasizing on self-respect rather than what society demands as she proclaims in the novel – “I can live alone, if self-respect and circumstances require me so to do. I need not sell my soul to buy bliss. I have an inward treasure, born with me, which can keep me alive if all extraneous delights should be withheld; or offered only at a price I cannot afford to give” (171).

#### **4.2 “The Yellow Wallpaper”**

“The Yellow Wallpaper” is a story written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and it was published in 1892. "The Yellow Wallpaper" was regarded as an early feminist condemnation of Victorian patriarchy in the early 1970s. The story is written in first-person narrative and it criticizes and condemns the attitude of nineteenth-century American men toward women and their physical as well as mental health problems. It is demonstrated throughout the story how the narrator is driven into insanity. The narrator named Jane suffers from postpartum depression. Her physician husband, John, tries to heal his wife's nervous illness, which is causing her to break down; John prescribes her to rest as a treatment for her condition. According to him, she should avoid any physical exercise and creative stimulation. She is not allowed to read, write, or visit her new baby; her only option is to sleep and take a deep breath of fresh air. John attempts to maintain her in a supporting role and convince her that she lacks the capability of making her own choices. The author and narrator are both females who have been subjected to patriarchal control throughout their lives. Charlotte Perkins

Gilman, the text's author, expressed the existing point of view on women and marriage in nineteenth-century America in her work. She wrote the story based on her own experience as she was also recommended bed rest to cure her postpartum depression. This had negative impacts on her mental health. She ultimately discontinued the treatment and recovered her mental stability, but only after that, she came to the realization that the treatment was ineffective and should not be recommended. The story depicts the oppression of women in the patriarchal society at the time. In her article "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' and the Politics of Color in America," Susan S. Lanser discusses how the phrase "John says" and the prescriptions that rendered the narrator immobile, infantilized and bored out of her mind reveal the sexual oppression in the contemporary feminist reading (418). The narrator is taken into an attic covered with yellow wallpaper for her treatment. She's never been locked up for so long, thus she starts to hallucinate over the wallpaper that there's a woman behind the wallpaper that shakes it which results in the front pattern moving. The narrator says, "Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over. Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard" (Gilman and Bauer 11). Her husband does not take her condition seriously and he thinks that it is just a temporary nervous depression that will be cured soon. The narrator expresses this in the following quotation, "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage. John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith... he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures... You see he does not believe I am sick!" (2). Even though the narrator wants to go outside and write down her thoughts in a journal, she is unable to do so because her husband "hates to have me write a word" (3). By keeping her in the room, he does more harm to her condition as she becomes obsessed with the wallpaper in the room and because of her lack of self-expression she loses her sanity in



the process. The story depicts how women in situations similar to Gilman's were mistreated at the time. "I even said so to John one moonlight evening, but he said what I felt was a DRAUGHT, and shut the window" (3) this quotation from the story shows how women were not listened to and their opinions were not taken seriously. The story also highlights how women struggled with the domineering male figure in their homes. The story reveals how John has complete control over Jane she says that her husband "Hardly let me stir without complete direction" (3). Although the protagonist is supposed to be submissive, she is a strong woman. She persists in writing secretly despite her husband's restriction because she knew it could make her feel better. However, she felt discouraged by her husband, "It is so discouraging not to have advice and companionship about my work" (5) and she had to give up all means of expressing herself because doing so in secret and being constrained just made her feel more drained. "Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do? I did write for a while in spite of them; but it DOES exhaust me a good deal--having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition" (2). This quotation depicts what difficulties women faced in the nineteenth century as a result of patriarchy.

Jane began to believe that it was her duty to release the woman from the wallpaper.

So, she proceeded to rip off the wallpaper, eventually freeing the woman by ripping off all of the wallpaper. She realizes she was the woman behind the yellow wallpaper and that it was time for her to leave. As the story progressed, she overcame her hardship and won her independence by standing up for herself, giving the audience a new perspective on feminism. She was able to overcome the difficulties she was facing because of her newfound self, although she was still unwell. Ashley N. Brooks in her article "Nursery Versus Straightjacket: The Feminist Paradox of 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" asserts that "Though she feels oppressed and surrounded by the wallpaper much in the same way that she is oppressed

and surrounded by the male figures in her life, the wallpaper provides her with something to rebel against. In the end, it is the wallpaper that frees her from her entrapment by driving her completely mad” (104,105). Therefore, saving the woman from the wallpaper represents the narrator’s liberation from her husband’s dominance. “I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!” (14) - these lines demonstrate how the narrator defies expectations of society and transforms into a conscious woman who is aware of what she wants, makes her own choices, and is free despite all impediments and limits.

## Chapter 5

### 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literature

The literary works from the 20<sup>th</sup> century that I’ll be discussing are the novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* written by Virginia Woolf and *The Bell Jar* written by Sylvia Plath. Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was an English writer, critic, philosopher and she is regarded as one of the twentieth century's most significant modernist authors. She delves into issues of personal identity and relationships, isolation, love and change in her writings. Woolf pioneered a new literary style known as stream of consciousness, which she used in the majority of her novels. *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *Orlando* (1928) are some of Woolf's best-known works. Besides being a novelist, she was also a feminist. Her essays, particularly *A Room of One's Own* (1929) have garnered widespread attention and discussion as those have inspired feminism. Sylvia Plath (1932 – 1963) was an American poet, novelist, and short-story writer. She is credited with developing and promoting confessional poetry and is best known for two of her published collections, *The Colossus and Other Poems*

(1960) and *Ariel* (1965), along with her only novel *The Bell Jar*, which was published shortly before her death in 1963. The novel is semi-autobiographical and it was published under her pen name Victoria Lucas. Plath was clinically depressed for the majority of her adulthood, and she was treated multiple times with electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). She attempted suicide several times in her life before taking her own life in 1963.

### **5.1 Mrs. Dalloway**

Modernism was a new literary style that emerged in the twentieth century as a result of the literary movement that began around the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and lasted until the early 1940s. Peter Childs in his book *Modernism* (2017) mentions that “This literary movement was driven by a conscious desire to overturn traditional modes of representation and express the new sensibilities of their time” (4). This literary style had a great influence on Virginia Woolf. She is also the pioneer of the stream of consciousness narrative technique. Woolf was a notable feminist figure in the early twentieth century, and feminist themes are prevalent in her works. She intended to highlight sexism and condemn patriarchy through her literature in the early twentieth century, when women were still repressed, not treated seriously, and unable to work in higher positions. *Mrs. Dalloway* is one of Woolf’s well-known novels and it was released in 1925. Her writing style in the novel is very experimental as arbitrary visions from the past and the present are put together in the novel. The story focuses on the protagonist named Clarissa Dalloway as she prepares for a party and she is the main organizer. The issue of self-discovery, as well as the uncertainty of sexual identity and desire, is tackled through the protagonist in the novel. The importance of independence is crucial for both Woolf and Mrs. Dalloway. The author depicts Clarissa’s loneliness and anguish in the novel which she feels because of her sexual inhibition and conformity to social conventions.

The following quotation relates to what Clarissa lacks, which are her sexual aversion to males and her refusal to acknowledge her feelings for Sally - "It was not beauty; it was not mind. It was something central which permeated; something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman or of woman together" (31). Clarissa is agitated because she can't let go of the memory of the kiss, she experienced with her friend Sally nor her feelings for Peter. "The most exquisite moment of her whole life. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down!" (36). This shows how Clarissa was affected by the kiss, and how her interactions with Sally elicited feelings of female desire in her, leading her to rethink monogamy and heterosexuality. In the period where lesbian relationships were stigmatized by society, Woolf reacts to the prejudiced society by showing a romantic relationship between Clarissa and Sally.

Additionally, Woolf emphasizes the need for independence in a relationship through Peter Walsh. Though Clarissa has been in love with Peter since she was a child, she did not want to marry him. Because she feels like he would have confined her soul and she would have felt suffocated. In the beginning of the story, she explains these as the reasons to why she married Richard instead of Peter; "For in marriage a little licence, a little independence there must be between people living together day in day out in the same house; which Richard gave her, and she him (where was he this morning, for instance? Some committee, she never asked what.) But with Peter everything had to be shared, everything gone into" (6). Therefore, it is evident that Clarissa rejected Peter and later got married to Richard because she desired personal space and the freedom to do whatever she pleased. However, Clarissa does not seem to have an identity of her own and her position in society is dependent upon her husband. In the article "Remapping Female Subjectivity in *Mrs. Dalloway*: Scenic Memory and Woolf's 'Bye Street aesthetic'" Candis E. Bond states that "The novel is clearly critical of the patriarchal institution of marriage and its oppression of women, but Clarissa's

appreciation of her marriage suggests it is integral to her present identity” (75). Moreover, through the characters of Clarissa, Lady Bradshaw, Lucrezia; Woolf criticizes how in marriage women are expected to put their personal needs and interests aside in order to serve their spouse and help him achieve his goals. Clarissa who used to have a bright and hopeful attitude has grown jaded and troubled due to the hard nature of marriage. She has lost her dream along the way. Similarly, Septimus's wife Lucrezia, who used to be a vibrant and playful young woman, has grown thin with worry as a result of having to bear the burden of her husband’s mental illness alone. Furthermore, Lady Bradshaw who used to be free-spirited but now her actions are controlled by her husband and she has no independent thoughts of her own. The following quote explains this: “Once, long ago, she had caught salmon freely: now, quick to minister to the craving which lit her husband's eye so oilily for dominion, for power, she cramped, squeezed, pared, pruned, drew back, peeped through” (106). Through her novel, Woolf critiques how the institution of marriage exploited women. She also reflects on women’s confinement in society through the title which refers to how women change their surname to their husband’s surname. After marriage only woman has to change their identity because of the norms created by the patriarchal society and they subsequently confine themselves under their husband’s identity.

## **5.2 *The Bell Jar***

*The Bell Jar* is the only novel written by Sylvia Plath who is an American writer and poet. The novel was first published in 1963 a month before Plath committed suicide. It was published under her pen name Victoria Lucas as it is a semi-autobiographical novel with names of the people and places changed. Later the novel was first published under her real name in 1967. The novel is a depiction of 1950s gender roles. It was difficult for women at

that time, especially in a society that prioritized and catered to men, resulting in disparities between men and women. The protagonist of the novel is a woman named Esther Greenwood. The novel illustrates how Esther dealt with the societal expectations as she went on with her life while she was also suffering from clinical depression and needed therapy. The novel draws significant parallels between Plath and Esther, their thoughts about the patriarchal society and their struggle with mental illness in that society.

Regardless of the societal norms imposed upon women, Esther is ambitious and passionate and she decides to rebel against the societal expectations. She works for freedom and equality. She is aware of her objectives and ideals. When Jay Cee asks if her job interests her, she responds enthusiastically that it does which reflects her passionate side (Plath 29). Also, her ambitious side is shown by her actions and her words through this excerpt from the novel – “All my life I’d told myself studying and reading and writing and working like mad was what I wanted to do, and it actually seemed to be true, I did everything well enough and got all A’s, and by the time I made it to college nobody could stop me” (29). She is, in fact, brimming with possibility which can be seen in the following quotation –

I was college correspondent for the town *Gazette* and editor of the literary magazine and secretary of Honour Board, which deals with academic and social offences and punishments—a popular office, and I had a well-known woman poet and professor on the faculty championing me for graduate school at the biggest universities in the east, and promises of full scholarships all the way, and now I was apprenticed to the best editor on any intellectual fashion magazine, and what did I do but balk and balk like a dull cart horse? (Plath 29).

Plath used the novel to draw attention to the difficulties and limitations working women faced in the 1950s. She was a firm believer in women's ability to write and edit, despite society's

insistence that they serve in secretarial duties. Because she was a woman striving to be a writer, Esther Greenwood's voice was silenced by society. As she was could not positively express herself mentally, sexually, or physically, this restraint led her to experience a breakdown. Adam T. Jernigan mentions in his article “Paraliterary Labors in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*: Typists, Teachers, and the Pink-Collar Subtext” (2014) how the limitation made her bodily react to it – “In *The Bell Jar*, by contrast, Esther's anticipation of the limited employment options available to her—together with her perception of others' complacency in the face of those options—causes her body to fold in on itself” (4). Esther is against marriage and the societal expectation of married women. As society expects married women to be just housewives and puts limitations on their own identity and careers, Esther cannot embrace those values. In is mentioned in the article article “Marriage and the Exploitation of Women: A Case-Study of *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath” that, “Plath, through her protagonist Esther Greenwood who has been disillusioned of these mistreated restrictive patterns of society, asserts that marriage is a tactic for female exploitation. It has not been designed to guard women. It has been designed to subjugate their freedom and to entrap them in domestic life” (Imtiaz et al. 50). Esther feels like she will lose herself if she gets married. She indicates this when she says,

I also remembered Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems anymore. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state (81).

Esther also rejects Mrs. Willard's idea of marriage being “infinite security” for women and she asserts that she rather wants to broaden her horizons and delve into new possibilities –

“The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July rocket” (79).

Even though women of that time were being oppressed, restrained and constrained by society, Esther believed that she deserves to be free. She fought to keep her independence and peace from those who disturb it which can be seen in this quotation – “This was the first time, since our first and last meeting, that I had spoken with him and, I was reasonably sure, it would be the last. Irwin had absolutely no way of getting in touch with me, except by going to Nurse Kennedy’s flat, and after Joan’s death Nurse Kennedy had moved somewhere else and left no trace. I was perfectly free” (232). During her stay in the asylum, Esther noticed that most of the rehabilitation centers were oriented towards men. She eventually became aware of the inequalities that women experienced in society and realized her inability to reach her goals is not entirely her fault. Esther finally embraced herself and her reality as a woman who had been through so much trauma. She regarded those as parts of herself that shaped her into the person she is as she said – “But they were part of me. They were my landscape” (227).



## Chapter 6

### Progression of Feminism in English Literature from the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup>

#### Century

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847 under a male pseudonym because during that period women were still oppressed, had no rights and were not respected by men. However, Brontë presented a strong independent female protagonist in the novel who was unlike the women of that time and the novel is regarded as the first Victorian feminist novel. Some saw Jane's passionate rebellion as completely unacceptable, implying that women are meant to be inferior to men. Despite the criticism, the novel was still a success. The first wave of feminist movement emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century where women demanded equal rights, more possibilities of employment and opposing husbands' ownership of married women. Brontë gave her protagonist a strong voice to oppose the inequalities and limitations women faced in society. Zheng Kelu mentions this in the article titled "Charlotte's Feminist Declaration" that "During the Victorian Age was men-centered and men-controlled times. Women were discriminated against by men at that time. However, the ahead-of-the-times female consciousness of Jane Eyre, the main character challenges men's authority" (167). Jane embodied the image of a "New-woman" who is firm and independent, focused on living her life according to her own principle finds her self-worth in her willpower and brain. Through her novel, Brontë defied Victorian society and advocated for women's rights.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman was released in 1892. It is considered to be an early condemnation of Victorian patriarchy as the author criticizes and denounces the attitude of men towards women in 19<sup>th</sup> century. The author draws a parallel between her own experience with mental illness and how the protagonist of the story slowly

descends into madness and gives the readers an insight into how women were treated by a male authority at home or in society during that period. The discriminatory gender roles in the story and their restricting nature constraining women is discussed in Ghandeharion and Mazari's article titled "Women Entrapment and Flight in Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper': "the narrator is confined in a room resembling a prison— are represented by the pattern of the wallpaper in which there is a front pattern, implying the bars of a prison constructed by the society in which women are confined, and a sub-pattern resembling the body of a woman trying to escape, which embodies all the women restricted by the rules and regulations of a patriarchy" (114). The narrator of the story recognizes the oppression and pressure she is under, so she defies expectations and transforms into a conscious woman who knows what she wants and is no longer bound by any constraints. Asha Nadkarni in her article "Reproducing Feminism in 'Jasmine' and 'The Yellow Wallpaper' refers to this – "Early readings by Elaine Hedges, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Annette Kolodny, and Jean Kennard take up the story as a universal text of women's struggles against the patriarchal structures that constrict them, casting the narrator as a heroine who chooses to become mad rather than assume her proper place in the patriarchal order" (219). It is apparent that 19<sup>th</sup> feminist literary works mostly deal with women experiencing inequality and oppression in a male-dominated society which was also the main rationale of the first wave of the feminist movement.

*Mrs. Dalloway* one of Virginia Woolf's best-known novels was published in 1925. The novel explores with the question of searching for self through the protagonist as James Schiff states in his article "Rewriting Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*: Homage, Sexual Identity, and the Single-Day Novel by Cunningham, Lippincott, and Lanchester" that "Mrs. Dalloway is about what it feels like to be alive—to be a self passing through the moments and hours of a day" (364). The novel also addresses the uncertainty of sexual identity and desire, as there

was a shift in public attitude towards sexual orientation as an effect of the second wave of feminism when this novel was published. Clarissa experiences loneliness and agony in the novel, which the author indicates as a result of her sexual repression and adherence to social conventions. Woolf had romantic relationships with women which were frowned upon by society during that period. By showing a romantic relationship between Clarissa and Sally Woolf defied the prejudiced society that treated lesbian relationships as taboo.

*The Bell Jar* is written by Sylvia Plath and was released in 1963 and it was during that period when the second wave of feminism emerged. The novel depicts the struggles the protagonist goes through as she struggles with her identity, societal expectations from women and the inequalities that women faced in society. Rachel Blau Duplessis states in her essay “Breaking the Sentence; Breaking the Sequence” that female writers must develop their own voices and they can break the sentence by infringing the male voice. She asserts that women must reject the “structuring of the female voice by the male voice, female tone and manner by male expectations, female writing by male emphasis, female writing by existing conventions of gender—in short, any way in which dominant structures shape muted ones” (222). Plath implements breaking the sentence in *The Bell Jar*. She tried to write in the feminine. Plath shows the entrapment women experienced because of the societal norms imposed upon them. She used her novel to highlight how women were oppressed by the patriarchal society in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. While most feminist literary works from the 19<sup>th</sup> century depict women rebelling against societal inequality, women in 20<sup>th</sup> century literature are also dealing with creative expression and are searching for their identity.

## Chapter 7

### Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to explore the evolution of feminism in English literature from the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century. I focused on how the writers portrayed women in their writings and how they highlighted issues faced by women in society in their works. The literary works that I've explored are the novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, "The Yellow Wallpaper" a short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, novel *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf and *The Bell Jar* a novel written by Sylvia Plath.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century women were treated as inferior to men and were oppressed by men in the home and in society. They did not have equal rights as men and were expected to adhere to the patriarchal social norms. As the waves of feminist movements emerged and women started to fight for their rights, society slowly underwent a transformation. The first wave of feminism emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and lasted till the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The goal of the movement was to promote women's equality and their property rights and to oppose chattel marriage and husbands' having ownership of married women and their children. The second wave of feminism started after the end of World War II and concentrated on achieving legal and social equality for women, as well as eliminating discrimination. The third wave of the feminist movement began in the 1900s and it still continues to this day. This movement continued with the same principle as the earlier waves. These waves had an impact on the literature of the time.

Brontë created a heroine in *Jane Eyre* who was courageous and self-reliant, but she also desired true love and a balanced relationship. The protagonist's growth and relationship with Mr. Rochester are depicted throughout the book, and the reader can see the appeal for

independence and equality. The author also opposes Victorian society by highlighting the limited prospects and lack of respect for women in Victorian society. In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Charlotte Perkins Gilman created a female protagonist who is supposed to be subservient but actually is a headstrong character. Through the protagonist of the story, the author showed how women were treated by a male authority in the home and in society and the sexual oppression that they experienced. The story depicts the development of a woman's consciousness in a male-dominated society in the nineteenth century. Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* deals with the question of searching for one's self and the sexual repression experienced by women. Through Clarissa and Sally's relationship, Woolf tackled the theme of homosexuality, as well as Clarissa's anguish and loneliness, which can be interpreted as a result of her concession to societal conventions. In the novel, *The Bell Jar* Sylvia Plath writes using a female voice. She attempts to temper the dominating voice of men and shows the struggles that women go through in her novel. The novel depicts the gender roles of the 1950s and how difficult it was for women at that time. It highlights how society was prioritized and catered to men which resulted in creating inequalities between men and women.

As the feminist movements progressed through the centuries, the way women were presented in literature also progressed. The necessity to address new issues such as sexuality, homosexuality and the value of freedom became more apparent and was highlighted by the feminist writers in their literary works. During the nineteenth century, writers began to emphasize the importance of women's independence through characters in their literature, as well as highlighted their demand for recognition and freedom in solidarity with the women fighting for their rights during that time. On the other hand, in the twentieth century, as women eventually acquired the right to vote, gained respect in society, and were more equal

to men, writers shifted their focus and started writing more openly about new issues, which is one of the major differences in the evolution of feminism in literature.

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