

**Twentieth Century Women's Literature: Exploration of Female-identity and
Expressions of Independence, Autonomy and Self-assertion**

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and
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By

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Abstract

Having studied women's literature of the previous centuries, it appeared to me that the most astounding change in women's writing has taken place in the twentieth century. This paper examines how writing by women has come through a revolutionary phase during the twentieth century. The underlying questions which have bothered progressive feminist thinkers, writers and activists over centuries, have been discussed here to explore the perplexing yet thoughtful world of women's literature. While contemplating the study of twentieth century women's literature, the most significant features that came under the spotlight include discovery of women's self-identity, women coming out from the male defined precincts to achieve independence and the authors' expedition towards autonomy and self-assertion through their writing. However, to trace the growth twentieth century women's literature has witnessed, a comparative investigation of Victorian and twentieth century women's literature has been stated briefly. In addition, the life and literary works of leading authors of twentieth century including Jean Rhys, Sylvia Plath, Katherine Mansfield, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Isak Dinesen have been delved into the paper to have a glimpse of the uniqueness of Modernist women's literature. As the study exposes the massive shift in style, approach, content, format and themes in Modernist women's literature, the observation of women's expressions and an emergence of a new era of feminist as well as women's literature have also been donned in the paper which eventually turns out to be an aspiring phenomenon of the twentieth century.

Introduction

In Twentieth century, feminism has been a representative force and one of the major significant changes in literature, social thinking and politics. Thus this avant-garde feminism does not only consist of modern feminist critics who have questioned our understanding of 'men' and 'women', rather the 'modern feminism is part of a bigger, broader as well as a more illuminated circle from where women authors' march towards independence and autonomy begins. This century has encountered authors like Jean Rhys, Sylvia Plath, Katherine Mansfield, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Isak Dinesen, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, who encapsulate women's thinking, imaginations, culture, stories of male oppression, tales of women's struggle and saga of breaking the age-old tyrannical chains to emancipate women's souls as well as to release their locked up spirit. Hence, the overriding argument spills out of the pot that Twentieth century women's literature is an expression of women's lives, inner thoughts, feelings, imaginations as well as an agony against the age-old patriarchal domination and the audacious literature of this century paves a way towards female identity, independence, enlightenment, self-assertion and autonomy.

After the nineteenth century was over, the beginning of twentieth century met the overwhelming question "Are there women, really?" (Beauvoir 13). Some even started mourning with the feeling that "woman is losing her way, woman is lost" (Beauvoir 14). However, while researching on twentieth century women authors, I found out a number of reasons to counter-attack these whimpering and whining voices as the Modernist women broke the clichéd images of women through their writing, philosophy and a range of feminist movements. The significant outburst happened in the shape of a reformed literature; a literature that preserves women's history, their lives, their untold stories, imaginations and thoughts- constructing a new route towards the exploration of female identity that channels them into a journey of accomplishing independence, self-assertion and autonomy. The voyage of exploring one's own identity begins with the shift in themes in twentieth century women's literature from the Victorian era. Victorian literature looped around the themes of moral values, goodness, virtue, love and luck, marriage and relationship and idealized portraits of woman being the perfect wife and the perfect homemaker. To emphasize on this issue a bit more, it is better to revisit one of the most powerful feminist voices of twentieth century, Susan Gubar. Looking at Sandra Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic* can make us realize how the common and ordinary patriarchal definitions confined women in the dark attic. Before the nineteenth century, women were identified with the "eternal types" (Gubar 591) including either the image of an

angel or a monster. As Gubar and Gilbert believe, “a woman writer must examine, assimilate and transcend the extreme images of “angel” and “monster” which male authors have generated for her” (Gubar 591). However, the anticipatory fact is that twentieth century women authors stood up against the age-old male representations of women through their pioneering literature. Thus, one focus of this paper is to highlight the distinguished features of twentieth century women’s literature including the diverse range of themes, change in women’s social and family roles, a remarkable shift in subjects of writing which added a new frontier in women’s writing. The shift in themes allowed women to express their inner selves which eventually lead them to be vocal about their rights as well as paving a way towards individual independence. However, the journey of independence came hand in hand with women’s education and enlightenment as twentieth century women started pursuing higher education. An educated, learned and progressive branch of women writers, activists, thinkers and philosophers embarked on an expedition unleashing the shackles of male dominance to assert their identity and selfhood. Even so, in this new journey, women authors came across a gallant group of feminist critics, writers and activists namely Elaine Showalter, Susan Gubar, Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Kegan Gardiner, Caroline Heilbrun and few others who helped in forming a new hypothesis for modern feminism. The second part of this paper reconciles the issues of a revolutionary change in women’s education as well as how this shift accelerates the flow towards their emancipation and autonomy. With the belief that “a literature of protest can engender sincere and powerful works” (Beauvoir 718), Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Isak Dinesen started constructing a new pathway establishing androgyny in women’s literature. Henceforth, the third and final chapter of the paper centers around the energizing, invigorating and liberating aspects of Modernist women’s literature that encapsulates as well as becomes the expression of women’s search for identity, a march towards independence, autonomy and self-assertion.

Chapter 1

Discovering the concept of Female Identity: Embarking on a journey of exploration

The idea of 'female identity' is a multifaceted one and does not really have any concrete definitions. However, this concept is crucial in contemporary literature. As Judith Kegan Gardiner points out in her article "On Female Identity and Writing by Women", "identity is a central concept for much contemporary cultural and literary criticism" (Gardiner 347). To actually understand and identify with this concept, deeper and more profound study is required. "Identity" does not stand as an independent concept alone as Gardiner believes. She thinks that the idea of identity actually comes "along with its even vaguer terminological twin, the "self" (Gardiner 347). Here the author refers to Carolyn Heilbrun while dissecting the idea of 'female identity'. Heilbrun, in her book *Reinventing Womanhood* "illustrates some current confusion about female identity and literature" (Gardiner 347). If women are identified by the male race then the modern day feminist critics like Heilbrun and Gardiner have strong obligations against this male-defined female identity. According to Heilbrun, this identity model rather turns into an irony as it is a matter of shame and "failure" for a woman if she has to take it from her man (Gardiner 347). Conversely, the twentieth century women authors as well as feminist critics, thinkers, writers, philosophers started an unannounced voyage towards establishing self-identity through breaking the age-old trend, familiar horizons and boundaries of women's literature that came along with the shift in themes, motifs, style and narration in writing.

The transformation and renovation of traditional thematic approaches is a significant trait in twentieth century women's literature which eventually allow women to assert their self-identity breaking the periphery of clichéd feminine circle in literature. In this century, women's literature circles around the themes of search for one's own identity and "self discovery" as mentioned by Susan Gubar, Sandra Gilbert and Elaine Showalter. Showalter observes that since 1920, the main theme of women's literature is 'a search for identity' and thus the modern day feminist critics have been playing a significant role in shaping women's literature. Undoubtedly, recent feminist criticism has been paving the way towards a new era of women's literature. While commenting on "a recent anthology of feminist criticism, one scholar claims that 'a feminist critique...is helping women to recognize themselves' (Gardiner 347). On a different note another group of feminist critics have discovered that "fiction by women reveals 'a fear of

losing...one's unique identity' whereas a third group believe that "feminist poets equate consciousness of oppression; consciousness of identity" (Gardiner 347). Being said that if we pay a closer look at 20th century female poets like Sylvia Plath, we would be able to encounter the poet's 'consciousness of oppression' and 'consciousness of identity' in the poems. In "Lady Lazarus", she talks about revival and she rises "out of the ash" and she intends to "eat men like air". The journey of Plath's life is reflected in her literary works as her writing portrays her fear of losing her 'self', her fear of being 'oppressed' and at the same time her 'consciousness of identity'.

On a similar note, another twentieth century author Jean Rhys, follows the same path as Plath did as she produces semi-autobiographical literature. In the introduction to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Francis Wyndham gives us a background for Rhys' literary journey. Looking at the life of the author, we see that Jean Rhys has had a troubled life in Dominica as well as in England. As a sixteen year old teenager in 1907, Rhys steps into England with the desire of having a luxurious, comfortable and secured life. For her disappointment, her life in England turns out to be more struggling and complicated than her life in Dominica. She had to encounter the miseries and devastation of the First World War. Having experienced the after-effects and disaster the War had caused, she married a Dutch poet with whom she lived a 'rootless, wandering life on the Continent, mainly in Paris and Vienna" (Rhys 5). Published in 1927, her first book *The Left Bank* contains the stories of a wandering artist and her life in Paris. Most of her short stories, as she herself admits are largely autobiographical, being inculcated with her childhood memories in Dominica. Rhys' personal relationships, her alienation and lonesomeness in Paris and Vienna are portrayed through fictional women characters in her work. For example, in the short story "Let Them Call it Jazz", the protagonist, a young lady, Selina Davis becomes the victim of cruel racial and gender discrimination as she emigrates from Martinique. In this story, the protagonist's life experience and stories of struggle parallel the writer's own. Rhys was rejected by a theater in England while trying to work as an actor. In addition to that, she was always laughed at for having a Caribbean English accent. Being a Creole, Rhys' early life was disturbed by betrayals by men, society and struggles for survival. Whereas a significant number of stories recall her childhood in the Caribbean, the novels embody her experience of being colonized and alienated in Britain.

Like Jean Rhys, Katherine Mansfield also came to England as a teenager at the age of nineteen. Her early life in England is quite analogous to Rhys'. Like Rhys, she entered into London-the city of blistering

dreams and fantasy with ardent desires. When few months were over, she realized that she was actually running after a mirage. London did not give her a prosperous life at all rather it snatched away a lot from her. Eventually she went to Germany. In London, her first marriage to a musician turned out to be unsuccessful just like Rhys' one. In Germany, she fell in love with a Polish writer with whom she had a devastating and fruitless relationship. Being shaped by her early experiences, Mansfield turned into a bitter, temperamental and a more complex person. However, it is noteworthy that the majority of the leading twentieth century women authors have gone through resentment, complexity and psychological violence in their lives which ultimately revolutionized modern women's literature. Be it the distressed Creole author Jean Rhys, the 'neurotic' Sylvia Plath, or the troubled Katherine Mansfield- all their signature works have led a way towards modern feminist literature. Plath becomes a prolific poet with her experimental styles, Rhys exercises autobiographical writing as a critic of racial and gender discrimination, Mansfield creates open-ended, expansible, resilient short stories expressing the inner self of the women characters.

Apart from exploring the lives of modern women authors, it is necessary to visit other twentieth century feminist writers, philosophers, thinkers and critics who talk about female identity and the role of modern women authors in shaping the concept of female identity. The twentieth century feminist author and a great philosophical thinker Simone de Beauvoir's classic work *The Second Sex* focuses on the history of women's position and treatment in society. In this book, Beauvoir traces the roots of women's subjugation, definitions of women endorsed by patriarchy and tries to suggest a way out of the patriarchal domination to establish an autonomous woman self. She believes that "one is not born a woman; one becomes one" (Beauvoir 14). Beauvoir's thoughts generated heat among anti-feminist critics during the twentieth century. Few accused Beauvoir of being a 'nymphomaniac', others marked *The Second Sex* as a form of pornography. The matter of anticipation for modern women authors and Beauvoir's descendents is that her journey was not disrupted by such criticism rather she became successful in shaking the ground of age-old patriarchal definitions of women. Being bold, vocal and rebellious, she continued her audacious journey to "be women, remain women" (Beauvoir 13). Thus, *The Second Sex* becomes an emblem of women's autonomy and identity, as it comprehends the "problems of women, the heirs of a burdensome past, who are striving to build a new future" (Beauvoir 31).

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, a new dynamic group of women authors have stepped into the field of literature whose literary works have added new dimensions to modern day feminist literature. As mentioned previously, authors like Jean Rhys, Sylvia Plath and Katherine Mansfield have not only constructed new definitions for women's literature but also created a path for their descendents which

definitely influenced later feminist writers to establish their own autonomous selves through literature. In fact nineteenth and twentieth century women's literature have come across a revolutionary change not only because of a new group of mainstream authors but also because of the emergence of a conscious, extremely vocal and socially active group of feminist critics like Judith Kegan Gardiner, Carolyn Heilbrun and others. Unlike their predecessors, the modern feminist critics not just dissect the existing women's literary texts rather they also try to come up with resolutions through which women authors can find their way into modern literature. As Gardiner points out, "During the past few years, feminist critics have approached writing by women with an 'abiding commitment to discover what, if anything, makes women's writing different from men's'" and they definitely have felt that some significant differences do exist (Gardiner 348). The roots of these differences between men's writing and women's writing can be realized from the fact that their life experiences differ in "profound and regular ways" (Gardiner 348). Critics have noticed some "recurrent imagery and distinctive content in writing by women, for example, imagery of confinement and unsentimental descriptions of child care" (Gardiner 348).

To illustrate the new thematic approaches adopted by twentieth century women writers, let us have a look at Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Both novels depict the female protagonists' experiences of confinement, oppression and subjugation. In *The Bell Jar*, Plath shares her experience when she felt herself "shrinking to a small black dot against all those red and white rugs and that pine paneling" and she felt as if she was "a hole in the ground" (Plath 9). Plath's protagonist in the novel Esther feels lonely in a crowd of thousands when her roommate Doreen is busy making love with her boyfriend. Plath explains her loneliness and she realizes that "there is something demoralizing about watching two people get more and more crazy about each other, especially when you are the only extra person in the room" (Plath 9). According to Plath, "it's like watching Paris from an express caboose heading in the opposite direction---every second the city gets smaller and smaller, only you feel it's really you getting smaller and smaller and lonelier and lonelier, rushing away from all those lights and that excitement at about a million miles an hour" (Plath 9). The extremity of modern urban life adds to these authors' experience and thus amidst the crowd, hustles and bustles of city life, Plath was submerged into despair. Like the young protagonist in *The Bell Jar*, Plath admitted, "The silence depressed me. It wasn't the silence of silence. It was my own silence" (Plath 10). In Plath's novel, Esther is portrayed as a sensitive young girl, "isolated from friends and family and unable to express [her] deep-seated feelings to anyone" (Perloff 522) and Esther is just a representation of Plath's own self. Plath wrote the bell jar to be free from the mental breakdown, her unstable psychological condition and the trauma of losing her own self amidst the crowd. Eventually the novel ends with a thin ray of hope where we can see that Esther

“having passed through death, she learns, with the help of Dr. Nolan to forge a new identity” (Perloff 529).

Just like in *The Bell Jar*, the imageries of suffocation, confinement, imprisonment are present in Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* as well. The protagonist of Rhys’ novel Antoinette goes through a feeling of being captivated throughout her life. A troubled childhood, together with a lack of motherly care, leads her to a certain sense of insecurity, which eventually causes an ultimate desolation in her life. Rhys portrays Antoinette’s fear of being suffocated with her strong language and use of vivid imagery. The garden in Antoinette’s house “was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible- the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell” (Rhys 19). Though Antoinette feels that their garden resembles the ‘garden of Eden’ but still that garden does not give her a feeling of openness rather the wildness disturbs her; even the “octopus orchid...bell-shaped mass of white, mauve, deep purples” are “wonderful to see [but] the scent was very sweet and strong” (Rhys 19) and Antoinette is frightened by this scenario. She never went near it rather her senses were disrupted by the beautiful wild flowers in their garden. The imageries described here hold a deep irony. Everything is picture perfect, beautiful but Antoinette does not feel comfortable in it. The garden, the Coulibri Estate everything makes her feel imprisoned as if in a cage. Antoinette does not actually find a place of her own where she belongs to. In the Caribbean, she is the “white cockroach” (Rhys 23) and in London she is called “black nigger”. In Coulibri estate, she often heard Caribbean people singing to her, “Go away white cockroach, go away, go away...Nobody want you. Go away” (Rhys 23)

The feeling of belonging ‘nowhere’ haunts Antoinette and it continues until the very last page of the novel. However, the remarkable feature in Rhys’ writing is that she used multiple narrator structure instead of limiting her novel to a single viewpoint. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys gives voice to the male counterpart of the novel Rochester as well as the readers also get to hear another narrative voice by Antoinette’s care taker Grace Poole. However, *Wide Sargasso Sea* does not deal with the male character’s heroic approaches, the female protagonist’s angelic character or the protagonist being tangled with her prince charming rather it brings about images of death, violence, dualism, double colonization, confinement and loss of identity. The novel starts with the suicide of Mr. Luttrell depicting how in “one calm evening he shot his dog, swam out to sea and was gone for always” (Rhys 17). Similarly, the book ends with “an apparent suicide” (Anderson 59). In addition, another major theme of the book incorporates the fear of losing one’s own identity which is portrayed through the characterization of Rochester. To illustrate, Rochester, the dominating male figure of the novel changes Antoinette’s name into Bertha in an

attempt to annihilate the protagonist's own identity. Reading Paula Grace Anderson's "Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*: the Other Side/Both Sides Now" would help to elaborate this a bit. Anderson places an indicator on "Rochester's deliberate erosion of Antoinette's identity...in his insistent renaming of her as 'Bertha'" (Anderson 58). To add on it is quite fascinating that Rhys, just like Plath "opens the door to an open-ended universe, where anything is possible, and anyone (including ourselves) capable of anything. Rhys points the way to the other side- the other side of all our easy assumptions about all aspects of reality, race, culture, sex, psycho-sexuality, sexual roles, about sanity and madness, about love and hate, about life-and therefore, about death" (Anderson 59). At the end, through lighting the candles and burning the English mansion of Rochester's tyranny, she establishes her identity, in the cost of her life.

Thus, Rhys' outstanding novel is a story of a victimized Creole searching for her own identity and trying to preserve her 'self' in order to become a woman she has always cherished to become.

In both novels, *The Bell Jar* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the protagonists' journeys include a search for their own identity and their autonomous beings- a journey that the authors of both novels had been through in their lives. This journey imprinted in books is actually an eternal journey which every woman has to pass through if she wants to be a 'woman' in its truest sense. Therefore, most twentieth century authors such as Plath, Mansfield and Gilman do not write for the sake of writing only, rather writing for them is a way to accomplish an identity as well as establishing the self through the representation of their life and living. Nonetheless, the remarkable attribute of twentieth century women authors is that they were not smothered by the discovery of the concepts of female identity only, rather, after embarking on the journey of exploration they continued to accomplish independence and liberty through unshackling their minds and souls.

Chapter 2

Way towards female independence: Education, Enlightenment and Emancipation

At the end of the nineteenth century, women's lives were changing drastically, most visibly for the middle and upper class women due to the expansion of women's education. Going to schools, colleges and universities was not only a matter of class privilege for women, but it was also an emblem of aspiration and self-esteem for many. Education empowered women to come out from the ordinary, male-defined horizons allowing women to be more self-sufficient and independent. The end of nineteenth century and the beginning of twentieth century also witnessed the manifestation of new forms of feminism that became a weapon of rebellion against male oppression and aggression. Eventually one of the vital forces of twentieth century women authors was education which enlightened them to start their journey towards emancipation. One of the noteworthy phenomena for women in this twentieth century is that women came across mainstream education and enlightenment which eventually mobilized them towards independence liberating them from social, political, patriarchal imprisonment.

Quite a few women of nineteenth century emerged as feminists. As Professor Randolph Bourne, a progressive intellectual at Columbia University describes it:

"They all are social workers or magazine writers in a small way. They are decidedly emancipated and advanced, and so thoroughly healthy and zestful, or at least it seems so to my unsophisticated masculine sense. They shock you constantly...They have an amazing combination of wisdom and youthfulness, of humor and ability, and innocence and self-reliance, which absolutely belies everything you will read in the story books or any other description of womankind. They are of course all self-supporting and independent, and they enjoy the adventure of life; the full, reliant, audacious way in which they go about makes you wonder if the new woman isn't to be a very splendid sort of person."¹

It can be argued that through vigorous writing, feminist authors and literary critics of this century greatly catalyzed the emancipation of women. As Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a prominent twentieth century feminist, sociologist and writer, describes herself "Here she comes, running, out of prison and off the pedestal; chains off, crown off, halo off, just a live woman."¹ Twentieth century feminism brought about changes that in a way shook the ground of patriarchal dominance largely. One of the central beliefs of the new feminists was to choose work and profession over domestic life and household responsibilities as can be seen in few authors' lives such as Gilman. In spite of her suffering from nervous breakdown and post-

natal depression, Gilman continued writing and she produced her signature short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" at that time of her life when she was not allowed to work, write or do any kind of physical activities. Through literature, women became vocal about their repressed position and male hostility. Like Gilman, other late nineteenth century and early twentieth century women authors like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Isak Dinesen rebelled against the patriarchal domination thereby asserting the feminist movement universally.

Twentieth century feminism was not strictly an Occidental phenomenon. During the twentieth century, while women authors, thinkers, philosophers and visionaries in Europe and North America championed an unannounced unified procession, in a rural village of Rangpur in North Bengal of then British India (present-day Bangladesh), Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was striving to establish gender equality through educating women from local Muslim families. Hossain was not only a prolific writer and feminist, but also the visionary of Bengali Muslim women's institutional education. Born in a conservative Muslim family, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was not allowed to go out of home to pursue education but these boundaries eventually were defeated against her determination and strong-will as she accomplished education at home with the help of her brothers. Her remarkable contributions in literature include *Motichur*, *Padmarag*, *Aborodhbasini* and *Sultana's Dream*. She is the pioneer of Indian Muslim women's education. In her only full-length novel *Padmaraag* (1924) Hossain establishes that marriage is not the ultimate goal in the life of a woman, an argument which goes hand in hand with Beauvoir's logic behind a married woman's confinement where she says "marriage incites man to a capricious imperialism; the temptation to dominate is the most truly universal, the most irresistible one there is, to surrender the child to its mother, the wife to her husband is to promote tyranny in the world" (Beauvoir 483). Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's only English novella *Sultana's Dream* (1905) is an attack on the privileged position of men in the contemporary society and women's imprisonment in South Asia. The aspiring fact about *Sultana's Dream* is that Hossain creates an imaginative female Utopia where women only reign. The author's ingenious writing style establishes the book as one of the most revolutionary and avant-garde feminist text. It is surprising to know that Hossain did not even go to schools or colleges but how her in-depth knowledge and learning acquired at home enabled her to write such a novel that broke the boundaries of women's writing in Bengal. The readers get lost in a world of imaginations, purity, peace and harmony as soon as they turn the first page of *Sultana's Dream*. The "Ladyland" Hossain crafts in the book is "free from sin and harm. Virtue herself reigns here" (Hossain 4). The extremity of patriarchal domination in India during her lifetime has been portrayed here where the protagonist of the book Sultana says "In India man is lord and master. He has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up the women in the zenana" (Hossain 5). The book not only opens up a new horizon for Indian girls who had

tolerated utter subjugation for ages but also showed women a path towards education and enlightenment. She believed that proper education could be the means of independence, autonomy and dignity for women. To illustrate, let us have a look at another sentence from *Sultana's Dream*, "we dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out the precious gems, which nature has kept in store for us" (Hossain 14). Moreover, Hossain's intellect allows her to go beyond the social barriers and she finally ended up establishing a school for Indian Muslim women in her region in the year 1909. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was able to rise beyond the limitations that society imposed upon her and she could do so because of her education, intelligence, determination and fortitude.

While this Bengali Muslim lady was waging a war against male domination in the Eastern front, the Danish author Isak Dinesen continued to express the bizarre and unjust patriarchal dominance happening in the West that confined women within the four walls of a household. Dinesen's writing contains reason and knowledge, myth and reality - a combination that makes her writing effective and splendid. Dinesen's stories are loaded with gothic and fairy tale elements but are not irrational or unrealistic. She uses metaphors, symbols and imageries to represent the underlying theme in a more evocative way. In her thought-provoking short story "The Blank Page", the imagery of the linen bed sheets being hung up, female blood being the art work on white sheets and the blank sheet-these actually set the mood of the story. However, the story encapsulates the notions of virginity and chastity and her depiction is indirect, shrewd and full with gravity. Her *Last Tales* contain few great ambiguous stories which are open to numerous interpretations. The significant trait of Dinesen's storytelling is that she distanced her tales geographically and longitudinally. The backdrops of her stories included eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, China and Persia. Dinesen's milestone contributions to literature include *Seven Gothic Tales* and *Last Tales* which turn out to be gothic, grotesque, obscure and mysterious ones- establishing Dinesen as an androgynous author. Her bold writing style trespasses the petty lines between male and female 'brain' while her characters, which can be interpreted in many ways, show extraordinary diversity. Dinesen adopts the pseudonym of Isak Dinesen, keeping her real name Karen Blixen secret, to reach a diverse and extensive range of readers around the world. Many people of that age actually found it difficult to identify the gender of the author when they came across the name Isak Dinesen, thus again asserting the fact that a great author must contain an "androgynous mind" as illustrated in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.

For another twentieth century woman author, Virginia Woolf, androgyny was a "way of liberating women from the negative forces played by patriarchy on their sex"³. On a different note, authors like Jean Rhys,

Sylvia Plath and Katherine Mansfield chose to express their stories and journeys as a way towards liberty from patriarchal dominance and oppression. Jean Rhys' protagonist Antoinette enlightens the readers with a Creole woman's journey where the young woman struggles to break free of male supremacy and eventually transcends the boundaries of life to find an escape from her confinement. She burnt the house where she was captivated, symbolically burning the legacy of male authority and control. Like Antoinette who was confined within four walls due to authoritative patriarchy, Sylvia Plath's heroine Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar* feels suffocated within the cage of city life where she was betrayed by men and the cruelty of the patriarchal society. In New York, Esther Greenwood "felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo" (Plath 2). Whereas Isak Dinesen was successful in establishing 'androgyny' through her literary works, Jean Rhys and Sylvia Plath persistently portrayed lives and stories of their struggle depicting women's reality at their time. Nonetheless, Katherine Mansfield, up to a certain extent, was occupied with writing stories which would fall under the category of 'androgynous thinking' as the protagonists of her short stories range from children to adults and from women to men. In *The Garden Party and Other Stories*, there is the sensitive teenage girl Laura, the alienated old man from "An Ideal Family", the middle-aged devoted maid from "The Lady's Maid" and many more characters, diverse in age, social background, culture- establishing Mansfield as an author who was able to go beyond the discriminations of body, sex and gender. Hence, such an androgynous author like Mansfield inspired another prominent twentieth century author Virginia Woolf. Even in her very short-lived life, Mansfield could become the inspiration for her contemporary authors as well as descendents through her insightful representation. Woolf herself admitted that she might not have written *Mrs. Dalloway* if she would not have met Mansfield. The relationship between Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield was a noteworthy one, not only in their personal lives but also for the literature they produced. Besides, Mansfield confessed to Woolf, "You are the only woman with whom I would like to talk work. There will never be another"⁴. Their relationship was much deeper than this which occurred after Mansfield's death when Woolf wrote, "no point in writing any more ... Katherine won't read it. Katherine's my rival no longer"⁴. Being said that, it is important to note the relationships between different twentieth century women authors to understand the kind of uprising this century witnessed in the field of literature. Apart from Mansfield and Woolf's personal as well as professional relationship, there was visibly a common philosophical and psychological connection between the authors around the world. Be it an author with an 'androgynous mind', a 'rebellious feminist' or a visionary, the major women authors of this century possessed something similar in their literary works and that is definitely searching for a way towards women's liberty, independence and autonomy through literature.

Before excavating the grounds of feminism, it is important to observe that feminism as a movement has passed through assorted phases since its beginning but when it comes to twentieth century feminist movement, the world of literature has encountered a revolutionary phase. This century witnessed the most diverse range of women authors, critics, thinkers, philosophers and social activists who were able to deliver a strong unified message through their writing. Their writing ranges from androgynous novels to insightful poems, profound criticism to strong non-fiction pieces and enlightening novellas to extraordinary short stories. Whatever movements had occurred during the past centuries, the true and most organized journey of independence for women commences from twentieth century with women authors breaking off the 'feminine' circle to make their way into the world of literature, philosophy and social activism. Hence, the authors from twentieth century started a new journey in women's literature that witnessed women's writing over women-centered writing as well as how women's own literature can suave the way towards their self-assertion and autonomy.

Notes:

[1]Lavender, Katherine. "The New Woman." *CUNY Library*. 2009. 30th Jul 2012 <<http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/386/newwoman.html>>.

[2] Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper." *Forerunner*. October 1913.

[3] Wright, Elizabeth. "Re-evaluating Woolf's Androgynous Mind". *University of St. Andrews*. 30th July 2012. <<http://www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english/ElizabethWrightArticleIssue14.htm>>

[4] Jones, Kathleen. "Katherine Mansfield: A Life and Legacy". *Resource site for biography of Katherine Mansfield*. 1st August 2012. <<http://www.katherinemansfield.net/life/woolf.html>>

Chapter 3

A March Towards Self-Assertion: Women-centered writing versus writing by Women

Twentieth century women's literature can be marked as a step towards women's self-assertion and a march towards establishing gender equality in the society. Interestingly, twentieth century encountered the assertion of female language as a separate aura from male language alongside Virginia Woolf's own endorsement of literary, intellectual and psychological androgyny.

However, to understand the revolutionary aspect of twentieth century women's literature we have to draw a strict line between women-centered writing and women's writing. As Ros Coward says, "it is just not possible to say that women-centered writings have any necessary relationship to feminism. Women-centered novels are by no means a new phenomenon. The Mills and Boon¹ romantic novels are written by, read by, marketed for and are all about women" (Humm 378). Thus to counter-attack the hackneyed women-centered novels, it was required to establish such a genre of feminist writings which deals with the essence of women's experience, their lives, thoughts and emotions. The matter of anticipation is that an encounter with women's life experience, exploration of their inner selves occurs in twentieth century women's literature. The most remarkable fact regarding the leading mid-twentieth and twentieth century's women authors is that their writing certainly does not only revolve around the theoretical and historical aspects of feminism, rather their writing is an embodiment of women's personal, social, psychological experience. To reflect on twentieth century women authors' contribution in creating a separate genre of female literature, it is essential for us to visit few of the pioneering novels, stories and poems written by the leading authors of this century.

Yet, the argument on women-centered writing versus writing by women goes on as the feminist critics of twentieth century continue to emphasize the uniqueness of women authors of this century. The British cultural critic Ros Coward, in her essay "Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?" places a spotlight on this issue. She thinks that the "distinctiveness of this genre has attracted attention" as she quotes a critic in her essay: "Liberating the Libido. Getting sex straight was an essential first step along the noisy road to liberation; writing about it could be the next leap forward. Books by women surveying sex, and novels by women whose heroines savour sex are selling like hotdogs in America- beating men into second place and

turning the authoresses into millionairesses at the drop of a hard shell dust-jacket” (Humm 380). Coming to this point, twentieth century authors were quite expressive when it came to writing about sex, eroticism, their own married lives, incest and so on. For example, Isak Dinesen’s *Last Tales* contains stories, which reflect bizarre images of women’s menstruation, wedding nights, rape, virginity and issues that were rare in women’s literature of the previous centuries. Let us travel a little back in time to realize the concrete variations that set twentieth century women’s literature far apart from Victorian literature. The classic Victorian literary works by renowned women authors like Elizabeth Barret Browning, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, circled mostly around themes of love, family, relationships, religion, whereas twentieth century women authors brought loneliness, confinement, personal relationships, rape, patriarchal tyranny, neurosis, psychological disorder, identity crisis, nationality, post-colonial experience in their writing. A demonstration of Victorian classic literature and modern twentieth century women’s literature would help us to draw a distinction between these two genres. The Victorian novels like *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte and few other women-centered novels depicted the themes of marriage, love, goodness, the role of a perfect wife or an ideal homemaker, revenge, virtue and ethics, family and religion whereas twentieth century women’s literature witnessed the most vivid and flamboyant range of themes, motifs and representation.

In addition, a feminist critic like Elaine Showalter divides feminist criticism in to two types. According to her, “the first type is concerned with woman as a reader-with woman as the consumer of male-produced literature...the second type of feminist criticism is concerned with woman as a writer-with woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres, and structures of literature by women” (Humm 382). Showalter has initiated a name for this second type of feminism; she calls it ‘*gynocritics*’. The appearance of twentieth century women’s literature has actually inspired critics like Showalter to think about a new type of feminist criticism that deals only with women’s literature, setting it apart as a separate, distinct, unique kind. She believes that “Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture” (Humm 383). Therefore the twentieth century women’s literature is that ‘newly visible world of female culture’² which embodies women’s experience, their lives, emotions, feelings, desires, stories of struggles and oppression, tales of emancipation and hope and chronicles of women’s liberation and self-assertion.

According to the leading twentieth century feminist critic Simone de Beauvoir, for women “it is rather that experience has not held them to strict reasoning; for them thought is an amusement rather than an instrument; even though intelligent, sensitive, sincere they are unable to state their views and draw

conclusions for lack of intellectual technique” (Beauvoir 482). Beauvoir’s statement can be related to Victorian literature when women used to write about marriage and religion, family and relationship, morals and ethics; confining themselves within the four walls of patriarchal authority. However, being a reader of the twenty-first century, I can certainly counter-attack Beauvoir’s statement as we came across the most creative, innovative, unique and distinctive era of women’s literature fashioned by twentieth century women authors. Be it the androgynous Katherine Mansfield or the neurotic and out of the ordinary Sylvia Plath, twentieth century has witnessed the most valiant branch of female authors all over the world including Isak Dinesen, Jean Rhys, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who have added a new dimension to the field of literature, thereby, asserting and liberating women from the age-old male prejudices.

It seems that the authors of this century actually realized that the biggest strength of a woman could be her writing as writing is a way to break through any kind of tyranny, confinement, subjugation. Moreover, through writing, someone can express her earnest and most secretive desires which eventually can unshackle a person from any kind of incarceration. Thus, a modern author like Jean Rhys decides to express her agony through her characters in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, “I Used to Live Here Once” and “The Day They Burned the Books”. The racial conflicts, the unfair and intolerant attitude of the Caribbean as well as English society towards a Creole girl- everything is courageously portrayed in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Antoinette, the protagonist of the novel is a victim of ‘double colonialism’. Throughout her life, Antoinette struggles to find a place of her own, or more specifically she constantly grapples to assert her own identity in the Caribbean and even in England. In the Caribbean, she is regarded as an outsider where the black community calls her ‘white cockroach’. Similarly she feels like an outsider even in England where she is nothing more than a ‘white nigger’. Rhys actually faced the similar experience as her protagonist Antoinette; thus this feeling of belonging ‘nowhere’ slaughters her senses. She chooses to write not to become a popular author rather to preserve a part of herself in her writing as well as to assert her identity and self through the literature she creates. Rhys herself declares, “I must write. If I stop writing my life will have been an abject failure. It is that already to other people. But it could not be an abject failure to myself. I will not have earned death.”³

At the end of the novel, Rhys’ revolt against this ‘double colonization’ is vibrantly portrayed as the protagonist’s weakness is turned into indomitable strength as she transcends all pettiness of life-losing connection with the ‘so-called’ luxury of English society. It is notable that Jean Rhys, like most of the other Modern women authors, considers writing as a weapon to assert her own identity. In addition, her short stories are semi-autobiographical as well, which portray the identity crisis and rejection a Creole girl

like Rhys faced in the Caribbean as well as in the dreamlike metropolitan London. "I Used to Live Here Once" is one such short story that reflects Rhys' experience of her return to her own homeland- the Caribbean. In this particular story, Rhys revives her memory of being rebuffed by people she thought were her own. The feeling of belonging nowhere, neither to her beloved Caribbean nor to the "all-consuming", shadowy city London drove her into desolation which she reflected in this very short but insightful story. Similarly, another strong, self-regulating author of the century Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story "The Yellow Wallpaper" contains the personal experience of the author just as happens in Plath's case. Gilman admitted that she continuously suffered from "nervous breakdown tending to melancholia." Gilman 1913. At that moment of her life, she was forcefully kept confined in a room as her physician strictly advised her not to do any work. However, she rebelled and listened to her heart. Gilman wrote in *Forerunner*, "I cast the noted specialist's advice to the winds and went to work again--work, the normal life of every human being; work, in which is joy and growth and service, without which one is a pauper and a parasite--ultimately recovering some measure of power." Gilman, 1913. These semi-autobiographical writings are not only just pieces of an author's creation rather these are chronicles of the author's secret emotions, of their untold lonely moments, of unrevealed miseries which need to be exploded in order to free themselves from the burdensome memories.

Furthermore, the other part of twentieth century literature constructed a road towards autonomy. Sylvia Plath started sharing the stories of her own desires, longings, heartbreaks, betrayals, suicide attempts as well as nervous breakdown. What Plath was going through in her life has been reflected in her writing to a great extent. Sylvia Plath, in her poems, expressed the most hideous truths about her life and psyche. Her agony against the dominating male figures is clear in her writings including the poem "Daddy", her only novel *The Bell Jar* and few other poems. Plath started writing the novel when she was going through the ugliest moments of her life. The novel exposes the twentieth year of Plath's life when she was being electrocuted on a regular basis. The protagonist of the novel, Esther Greenwood goes through depression and mental breakdown just as it happened to Plath in real life. Hence, *The Bell Jar* is actually a semi-autobiographical novel that explores Plath's search for peace and tranquility. She admits later in her life that *The Bell Jar* is an "autobiographical apprenticeship" and she "had to write in order to free herself from the past" (Perloff 507). The protagonist of the novel, Esther's "experience differs from that of so-called "normal" girls in degree rather than in kind. It is simply a stylized or heightened version of the young American girl's quest to forge her own identity, to be herself rather than what others expect her to be" (Perloff 509).

Before diving deep into the ocean of twentieth century women's literature, it is important to understand the content and nature of the authors' writing. As discussed earlier, during the mid twentieth century, women authors like Plath, Rhys became very open about portraying their personal lives. By paying a closer attention to another twentieth century author Gilman, it can be observed that Gilman went through similar type of nervous breakdown as Plath did. It has been mentioned earlier in this chapter that Gilman in her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" wrote about how she was "absolutely forbidden to "work"" (Gilman 1). On a different note, Gilman does not surrender herself in front of this male definition of 'neurosis treatment'; rather she believes that "congenial work, with excitement and change" (Gilman 1) would help her recover from the post-natal depression. The parallel line between the lives of Gilman and Plath can be drawn by tracing back their life history. When it comes to Plath's life, it seems like that two male figures were constantly crushing her down. One was her father who died early when Plath turned eight but had an everlasting effect on Plath's psyche. Another male figure was her husband Ted Hughes. Plath was 'sandwiched' between these two male figures, which is reflected in her writing. The trauma of losing her father in childhood haunted her which in a way contributed to her mental illness. She tried to commit suicide several times but every time she was either saved or cured. In spite of all the mental illness and electrocution as well as the psychotherapy, she did not stop writing. Her writing flourished during her early teen years and she continued to be a prolific writer until her death. The other chapter of her life includes her distressed relationship with Ted Hughes, which eventually led her towards suicide. Hughes' infidelity accelerated Plath's nervous breakdown, melancholy and instability. On a different light, Gilman did not commit suicide; rather she confronted the adversities that life had to offer her. The similarity between her and Plath's life lies in how both women were treated by the male figures in their lives, how they were accused of being neurotic and how both were confined within spatial as well as psychological boundaries.

After analyzing the content, type and interior of few twentieth century female authors' lives and literature, we can certainly sketch some major differences between the classic and modern women's literature. It would be appropriate to quote a feminist critic Rita Felski to realize what new things twentieth century modern women's literature has brought to us. According to Felski,

"In postulating marriage or death as the necessary conclusion of the women's text, the eighteenth-century novel confronts the question of the social possibilities available to women and answers it with an emphatic finality. The contemporary feminist novel does not usually supply any such closure, and the question of the ultimate social consequences of individual transformation is left open" (Felski 133).

Following the quote, it can certainly be said that Rhys, Dinesen, Plath, Gilman, and Mansfield- most of these twentieth century authors create open-ended literary pieces; which is a very Modernist phenomenon. *Wide Sargasso Sea* does not really close with an explicit death or suicidal scene; rather it leaves the readers wandering along the “dark passage” as the protagonist of the novel does. The last scene of the book is deliberately designed to keep the book open to interpretation and that is the signature style of most of the Modernist writers. Jean Rhys is compared with other Modernists such as James Joyce and T.S. Eliot for her unique, modern, inconclusive, and open to interpretation writing style. Let us have a look at the last few lines from *Wide Sargasso Sea* to realize the intuitiveness as well as the modernist inclusiveness, “I got up, took the keys and unlocked the door. I was outside holding my candle. Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do. There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage” (Rhys 190).

Along with the investigation of women’s subjugation from the mainstream of the society, Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* explores male viewpoint about their female counterparts which is crucial to the understanding of twentieth century feminist texts. Beauvoir examines that “the husband takes pleasure in this role of mentor and guide. Nora’s⁴ husband assures her: ‘Only lean on me-let me counsel and guide you! I wouldn’t be a true man if this very womanly helplessness didn’t make you doubly attractive in my eyes...I have broad wings to shield you’” (Beauvoir 483). To continue with it should be realized that Modernist women authors Rhys, Mansfield, Plath, Gilman, Dinesen and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain- all of them did not actually surrender to this very sense of ‘patriarchal superiority’ or ‘male authority’. Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Dinesen’s *Last Tales* and *Seven Gothic Tales*, Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Hossain’s *Sultana’s Dream*- all these works in a way assert woman self and boldly uncover the residues of male domination in order to work as an eye-opener for women all around the world. Another striking point about these twentieth century literary works is that most of them are inspired and/or taken from the real life experience of the authors. Thus, this helps to explore the nature of feminist *Bildungsroman*. At this point, let us have a look at Rita Felski’s concept of feminist *Bildungsroman*, “Whereas the male *Bildungsroman* is often defined as a novel of apprenticeship and typically depicts the childhood and early manhood of the protagonist, the feminist *Bildungsroman* thus embraces a much wider range of ages. It is often only after the experience of marriage that the heroine is able to see through and reject the seductive myth of romance as the key to female self-identity, so that the journey to self-discovery frequently occurs at a relatively late stage in the protagonist’s life” (Felski 137).

It is interesting to note as to how this quote goes hand in hand with Beauvoir's statement as well as the modern female authors' autobiographical literary texts. According to Beauvoir, when the mesmerizing screen of petty romance moves away from the woman's heart, "she does rebel. Even if at first she was impressed by male prestige, her bedazzlement soon evaporates" (Beauvoir 484).

To put it briefly then, twentieth century witnessed the most autonomous and liberating pieces of literary texts by self-assertive women authors which ultimately redefined and reshaped women's literature. Considering the nature, uniqueness and distinctiveness of twentieth century women's literature, it can undoubtedly be said that the march towards self-assertion begins from this century and eventually this leads a path towards women's autonomy and emancipation.

Notes:

[1] Mills and Boon is a British publisher for romance novels.

[2]Lavender, Katherine. "The New Woman." *CUNY Library*. 2009. 30th Jul 2012
<<http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/386/newwoman.html>>.

[3]Sylvester, Mary. "Jean Rhys."31 July 2012 <<http://www.marysylvester.homepage.t-online.de/englishliterature.htm>>

[4] Nora is a character from Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*

Conclusion

The journey of establishing one's own identity amidst the dark clouds of male authority has undoubtedly been a challenging task for women authors of the twentieth century. Yet, with the audacity of a modern woman and the spirit of an individual independent self, modern women authors of this century travel towards relinquishing the scars of patriarchal tyranny, confinement, imprisonment in order to enter a newer, better, broader world full of hope, inspiration and openness. The matter of anticipation is that twentieth century women authors "rose from the glass coffin of the male-authored text, as they exploded out of the Queen's¹ looking glass, the old silent dance of death became a dance of triumph, a dance into speech, a dance of authority" (Gilbert 609). One of the highlights of the paper was to discover whether woman is merely an "art object" and is she not capable of creating her own artwork? This paramount question is raised by Gubar in "The Blank Page and the Issues of Female Creativity" as she states, "if we think in terms of the production of culture, she is an art object: she is the ivory carving or mud replica, an icon doll, but she is not the sculptor" (Gubar 244). Is Gubar right? Are the self-asserting twentieth century women's texts not proof enough of women being the creators of art and literature? Looking at Modernist authors including Jean Rhys, Sylvia Plath, Katherine Mansfield, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Isak Dinesen give us an idea of how self-asserting and self-defining literary texts can be. Then is it far away from reaching the peak of women's independence, autonomy and liberty or have we come near it? The question definitely persists even though the twentieth century has witnessed an optimistic reformation in women's literature. The recuperation in women's literature in twentieth century occurred gradually through a range of processes including education, social activism and women like Plath, Rhys, Mansfield, and Hossain coming out from the humdrum of male-assigned roles, confronting the harsh reality and acquiring strength enough to survive in this world through self-assertion. However, the Modernist women authors did realize that "for all literary artists, of course, self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion" (Gilbert 596). Therefore, twentieth century women's literature carries the emblem of women's identity, independence, autonomy and self-assertion.

Notes:

[1] Queen here refers to the character in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* who owns a magic mirror.

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