



WOMEN IN AMERICAN NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

This presentation briefly describes the evolution and the role of women in American novel. It shows how the position of a woman changed since early American novel. It also presents the most popular American woman writers since early literature up to now. In early American novels women were almost nonexistent. The native women in the expedition were portrayed as laborers, pottery makers and wives that are subject to the men. Women were used for reproduction and to help complete daily tasks. Women did not play an important role, still fought over by men, which has not changed even in the 20th century. In the very early American novels women were considered nothing more than men's possessions.

In 20th century women began to take a prominent role in American Novel. It is not until later in the 20th century that women gain complete equality and supremacy. Women have played a large role in human history. This role is reflected in American movies. Women have continually achieved equality and acceptance in American novel as time has moved on from 1500's to 21st century. Women's issues in American novel helped women to gain acceptance and equality in society. Women's success in American novel can continue to gain equality to men. Lastly the success of women in American novel could be a template for women and help to improve Women's rights around the world. Women will continue to gain in society.

Key Words: *Feminist movement, freedom of women, oppression, racial discrimination, race, class, gender, colonialism, anti-colonialism, post-colonialism.*

INTRODUCTION

Before the 18th century the role of women in American literature were rare and far. Women were seen as weak and unfit to work outside home. The native women were portrayed as laborers, pottery makers and wives that are subject to men. America experienced many changes following civil war. The country was in a period of transformation in political, economic, social and literary aspects. Economic climate shifted from agriculture to industrial America. As the country emerged into the industrial revolution female authors were forging a place for themselves in literary canon. The feminist movement was called into question. The role of women in society and female authors responded by creating and presenting strong, self reliant women. Elizabeth Cady Stanon and Susan B Anthony are among the women who fought for the women's right movement.

The feminist movement claimed a huge victory by securing the right to vote for women. Literature of this period shows many changes of the era including 3,000 new words introduced into American language. Women issues in literature gained wide spread



prominence in the 19th century. Despite living in a patriarchal society, female writers fought for their acceptance in the literary community. In the previous era's writings by women were characterized primarily to writing for children, poetry and characterized by sentimentality, morality, and depth of feeling.

During the 19th century the women suffrage movement reacted to the social, legal and political inequalities placed upon women. Women literature reflects the feminist movement through theme characterization and situations.

19th century

Susan Waver- her women issues are 'The wide world' which was the story of an orphan girl forced to find her spiritual path in an oppressive world –the 1st novel to reach one million marks in sales. Two years later, 'Uncle Tom's cabin' by Harriet in which the issue was evils of slavery was raised, sold 50,000 copies. Female authors had come into their own economic and social force.

Kate Chopin- Her 1st work was published following the death of her husband in order to support herself and her six children. She believed strongly in the freedom of women. Her stories 'The awakening' 'The story of an hour' 'The Storm' were of strong female characters.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman- She was greatly interested in the feminist movement .She suffered with postpartum depression which provided an insight to her famous story 'The yellow wallpaper'. She explained the issues faced by women in the society during that time. Forbidden by her husband and doctor to read or write her horrifying journey is recounted through the journal she writes in secret.

Louisa May Alcott- She created strong self-reliant female characters presenting a new definition for the role of women in America. Women issues in her writings 'Lives of Girls and Women' in the 19th century were regarding

- [a] The legal status, social attitudes, race, immigration of women and also their marriage.
- [b] During the civil war she worked as a nurse and wrote 'Hospital sketches' in which she discussed about medical education for women.
- [c] The 19th century dress reforms and also 'Eight Cousins'
- [d] Slavery and Abolition
- [e] The women's suffrage movement.

Social influences:

- [1] Feminist movement was strongly shaped, they all expressed similar views on women issues like Women should be recognized as individuals and equal to men.
- [2] Feminist movement worked in favor of political and social equality.



[3]Racial discrimination was a social issue of that period. Another issue was the social expectations of women did not vary much from generations past. The ideal woman was expected to be submissive, pious and mothers.

20th Century

The 20th century served the purpose of presenting readers with realistic views of women's intellect, desires and potential ranging beyond the limitations of submissive domestic life.

The important women writers with women issues are

Sylvia Plath- An American writer and a feminist, Plath has become a symbol of the female artist as victim and martyr in a male dominated society. As a divorced mother of two children, she struggled a lot in her day-to-day life. Her autobiographical novel 'The Bell Jar' is a moving account of her life as a young woman and a psychiatric patient.

Harper Lee- One among her famous novels is 'To kill a mocking bird'. Her themes were race, fear, women and feminists, justice and judgment, family, youth, compassion and forgiveness, morality and ethics.

Native American Women- Issues of Race and Gender

Native American women community suffered with oppression. They were treated in an in-human way on the grounds of race and gender. But this did not stop the Native American women from revolting against the racial and gender oppression. they were oppressed and maltreated by the colonial power of united states .They faced war ,diseases, maltreatments, lower wages, unemployment .The women were suffering of domination and oppression based on race ,gender, social structure, of inequality. This has limited the opportunities and forced the women in poverty. Their lives were constrained; they were not allowed to participate in social institutions. The labor opportunities were influenced by race, gender discrimination. They were discriminated on the grounds of education, employment, and politics. The nature of American women was subjected to cultural attacks also.

The oppression of American women has found its outlet in Literature by women and men writers. Due to the effect of Colonialism the Native American women were suppressed, their experiences and issues did not appear until 1970. With the help of literature these women found their voice which was considered as one of the benefits of the feminist theory. Female Authors have depicted their experiences in their creations.

Louise Erdrich- Her writings deal with racial and feminist movements, phases of colonialism and post-colonialism. Her contributions to the literature of the native American women have paved a way for the emerging writers and to the development of literature itself.

Tony Morrison- She has made her readers re-live the past through her creation. She interrogates and dismantles the histories of racial discrimination. She has also merged the concept of legendary stories with a modern thought process and creative strategy of writing.



Oppression and segregation is the history of African American and Native Americans – American Indian Women.

They were treated in an inhuman way, on the ground of race and gender, not only by the so called white society, but by their male counterparts also. The White Women present their issues with the help of literature that is termed as feminism. The feminists did not consider the issues of Colored Women while presenting their issues. The Coloured Women- American Indian and African American-started presenting their own issues with the help of their own literature. They started their movements termed as Native activism or American Indian feminism and Womanism. They communicated their issues such as racism, gender, oppression and segregation through their creations.

Native American Women's Activism

Native American Women-American Indian Women-revolted against racial and gender oppression. Their political concerns have much in common with African American Women or black women. They tried to find a helpful and supportive approach to put feminism in a framework of their activism. They considered themselves the feminists, but they differed from European American feminists. They dealt with the female marginalisation and inequality in United States of America. They were oppressed and maltreated by the colonial power of the United States. The colonial power caused the destructive changes in their tribal gender roles also. Their gender roles were affected by the process of Christianisation and Westernisation. In this relation, Allen Paula has rightly mentioned, "... the devaluation of women that has accompanied Christianization and Westernization." (Allen Paula 1986:202) European American influence was one of the elements those led to the growth in violence against Native American Women. They were oppressed as Colonised American Indians on one side and the Morrison has attempted to create a vision for the future of women especially during the slave period.

Oppressed groups were denied and the values and practices of the dominant groups were elevated. To get rid of these obstacles the Native American Women shaped their lives and the lives of their families with the help of dignity and determination. They opposed this system by revolting and rebelling against it. They tried to change the social structure and accommodation. They got involved in slave rebellions, American Indian wars and workers' revolts in the fields and mines. They also resisted the dominant group in relation to primary labourers in families. The Native American women created new institutions and helped their children to have own cultural identity. These mothers promoted a cultural heritage as a tool that would help them and their children to face racism, poverty and discrimination effectively. But, it is the case that only resistance will not lead to a desirable change in the society and in the plight of people affected, it needs determination. Some of the women laid their weapons down in front of triple burden of race, class and gender. Some of the women get escaped of these burdens by means of crime, drugs and antisocial alternatives of lifestyle. Finding no alternative than running away, few women became the parts of street culture that



led them to the life of crime, drug addiction, prostitution and imprisonment or captivity. Due to these reasons the dominant society could control them and suppress their revolts.

Discourse of Oppression of Native American Women

The oppression of Native American Women has found its outlet in the literature by the women and men writers. Due to the effect of colonialism the sound of Native American Women has been suppressed at the local level. Their experiences and issues did not appear until the 1970s. The pioneers like Zitkala-Sa(1876-1938), Ella Cara Deloria (1889-1971), Mourning Dove (1884-1936), Luci Tapahonso (1953), Leslie Marmon Silko (1948), Lousie Erdrich (1954), etc. paved a way for the future movements. They focused on a number of obscured issues and aspects of Native American Society. Certain issues are presented in the literature by writers like Gloria Naylor, Denise Segura, Karen Hossfeld, Ruth Zambrana, Linda Grant, Elizabeth Higginbotham and other writers. This discourse in the literature gave a way to the emergence of the political and social activism among Native American Women. With the help of literature these women found their voice that is considered to be a benefit of feminist theory. In this relation Rebecca Tillet has expressed, the “recovery and privileges of previously silenced female voices appeared to be a key benefit of feminist theory.” (Rebecca Tillet 2007: 68)

A number of Native American female authors have depicted their experiences in their creations. For example, Lousie Erdrich offers a vast perspective on the Native American realities of these women's lives. Her writings deal with racial and feminist movements, historical phases of colonialism, anti-colonialism and post-colonialism. Her contribution to the literature of Native Americans has paved a way for the emerging writers and the development of literature itself. Tillet has pointed that Lousie Erdrich has tried to eradicate the notions that have made these women homogeneous, In the same way literary figures, such as Allen Paula (1939-2008), Janet Hale (1946), Leslie Silko (1948), Diane Glancy (1941) Wendy Rose (1948), Joy Harjo (1951), nila northSun (1951) and Winona LaDuke (1959) have tried to present the issues of Native American Women through their literature.

The Native American society was economically and socially subordinated. It remained socially and culturally distinct in American Society. It was a systematically discriminated and socially marginalized racial group. They have their distinctive culture and their own identity within a large mainstream American Society. The larger society imposed their gender roles and relationships upon Native communities that led to sexual violence. If a woman marries to a white man, the membership in their own community to that woman would be denied. On the other hand, if a man gets married to a white woman she would become member of their tribe easily. This was nothing but an example of sexual violence in the community. Due to this reason Native American women have not been empowered within the community. These women were oppressed by the male of their own community as well as by the enslavement. They were suffering of unemployment, inequality and poverty.



Native American Women did not have a hopeful tool to present their issues like the white women's feminism. They tried to set mainstream feminism in their own framework and present their issues of oppression, sexism, racism and gender. This framework of Native American activism led to creation of Native American women's literature and social activism among them. The women writers like Allen Paula, Diane Glancy, Janet Hale, Joy Harjo, Nila NorthSun, Louise Erdrich and Winona LaDuke contributed a great deal to the discourse of oppression of Native American women. They tried to pursue the goals of decolonisation and national liberation. They undertook the task of presenting experiences of Native American Women with the help of their literature. They contributed their biographies, culture preservation and social institutions to the American literary field and American society. They gave a way to their matrix of domination created by race, class and gender. In this relation Patricia Collins has stated about the presentation of Colored Women, "*Experience on three levels namely the level of personal biography, the group level of the cultural context created by race, class and gender and the systematic level of social institutions.*" (Patricia Collins, 1986:364-65) The Native American Women used literature as a useful device to illustrate the relationship of social structure to human desires and their acts. Within the realm of race, class and gender oppression, women created lives for themselves, their children and families as well as for their community. In this creation they found the support of dignity and determination to revolt against the system

CONCLUSION

Women have played a huge role in human history which was also reflected in the American Literature. Although women may have started from a lesser role than that of men, women have continually achieved equality and acceptance in American literature as time moved on from the 1500's to the 21st century. Woman's role in American literature helped women in gaining acceptance and equality in society. Women's success in American literature has and can continue to be a springboard for women to gain equality to men. Lastly, the success of women in American literature could be a template for women around the world, and could help to improve women's right around the world.

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