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## EARLY GENDER REPRESENTATIONS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

### Abstract

Although gender studies sound modern, gender issues were reflected in various forms in fiction before. The images of men and women; the specific gender problem of each period; gender inequality usually were the main themes of the literature. Our article deals with the question of how gender issues are reflected in the earliest ages of English literature. To conduct our analysis, we investigated the gender issues that appeared in English fiction since the Middle Ages and tried to reveal their similarity and differences. We used comparative, descriptive and analytical methods to study the works of prominent English writers from the 12th to the 18th century. We came to the conclusion that although women were praised as symbols of beauty in the early stages of literature, their rights and powers were limited, they sometimes lived as slaves and concubines, and in most cases, they were dependent on men. Nevertheless, women in literature were described by male authors sometimes in more positive shades.

**Keywords:** *gender, English literature, woman, man, gender studies*

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### İngilis ədəbiyyatında gender reprezentasiyasının ilkin mənzərəsi

#### Xülasə

Gender tədqiqatları müasir səsənsə də, gender problemləri əvvəllər bədii ədəbiyyatda müxtəlif formalarda əks olunurdu. Kişi və qadın obrazları, hər dövrün spesifik gender problemi, gender bərabərsizliyi zaman-zaman bədii ədəbiyyatın əsas mövzularından olub. Məqaləmiz ingilis ədəbiyyatının ən erkən dövrlərində gender məsələlərinin necə əks olunduğundan bəhs edir. Təhlillərimizi aparmaq üçün orta əsrlərdən bəri ingilis bədii ədəbiyyatında ortaya çıxan gender problemlərini araşdırıb dövrlər üzrə onların oxşar və fərqli cəhətlərini açmağa çalışmışıq. Məqalədə, 12-18-ci əsrlərdə görkəmli ingilis yazıçılarının yaradıcılığını gender tədqiqatları nöqtəyi-nəzərindən öyrənmək üçün müqayisəli, təsviri və analitik metodlardan istifadə etmişik. Belə qənaətə gəlmək olar ki, ədəbiyyatın ilkin mərhələsində qadın gözəllik simvolu kimi təriflənərək təsvir olunsa da, onların hüquq və səlahiyyətləri məhdud şəkildə olub, onlar bəzən qul, cariyə kimi yaşamış, əksər hallarda kişilərdən asılı vəziyyətdə həyat sürmüşlər. Buna baxmayaraq, bir çox hallarda, bədii ədəbiyyatda qadınlar kişi müəllifləri tərəfindən daha müsbət çalarlarda təsvir edilirdilər.

**Açar sözlər:** *gender, ingilis ədəbiyyatı, qadın, kişi, gender tədqiqatları*

#### Introduction

The role of women in literature, the depiction of women and their problems can be investigated through historical realities. In parallel periods of history, until the 19th century, as in Azerbaijan and Turkey, English women were deprived of the privileges granted to men; they did not have an active

role in making significant decisions, in education or equal rights with men in the labour market. In her book “The English Woman in History” (1957), the English historian Doris Mary Stanton noted that English women could not regain the freedom until the end of the 19th century that they enjoyed during the Anglo-Saxon period (Stanton, 1957: 269).

If we look at the history of Azerbaijani literature, it is not distracted that history and literature are mainly based on men. The activities and creativity of women, which were overshadowed all over the world, were also reflected in the statistics of Azerbaijani literature. The woman's lifestyle, her activities in public affairs, and her living in harems, polygamy, and her lack of control over her own body were, of course, obstacles for her development and creativity. The issues that draw the attention of all gender researchers, including feminists, are that – women were considered to be the second beings, to be worthless in comparison to men, and that they were exploited slaves and harems who were sent from one palace to another as an item. However, even though that they had to pass through all these hardships and had difficulties in every field which were easy for men, there were many popular and prominent with their style in history.

Of course, we can see every historical point reflected in English literature as well. In this regard, it would be interesting to analyse the literature in successive historical stages to see the stages of development of gender representation in English literature.

### **Glance to the Initial Gender Problems in English fiction**

To analyse the first female characters in English literature, let us look at the initial representation of gender issues in Geoffrey Chaucer's “The Wife of Bath Tale” (1386) in the play “The Canterbury Tales”. Although “The Wife of Bath Tale” is one of 24 stories in “The Canterbury Tales”, it is more popular and considerable than the others in the field of gender investigations. Before telling her story, The Bath Woman presents a long prologue condemning celibacy and five marriages. As a result, this tale becomes more popular, especially for this prologue (Libris, Arturi, 1868-1879: 192-203) If we analyse this play in terms of gender studies and feminist tendencies, we can see that since the 14th century, women considered men as their rivals, tending to win over them and establish power. But the main idea is that if men put limits to the position and power of women, then every woman can become a witch for a man; otherwise, a woman who has the authority that she deserves can become an angel and make a man the happiest person.

William Shakespeare's “Taming of the Shrew”, written between 1590 and 1592, was the target of many feminist literary critics for misrepresenting the value of women. They criticised the description of women as property and promoting subordination to men as a whole. Feminist literary critics did not consider Petruccio's treatment of Catherine to be correct. However, Catherine herself was abusive and teasing, her husband's trying to “tame” and subjugate her by treating like an animal was unacceptable and a misogynist attitude. John C. Bean writes: “*Although “Taming of the Shrew” is a comedy, the protagonist is depicted through inhumane treatment by her husband*” (Bean, 1980: 66).

The researcher Dorothea Kehler noted that “Taming of the Shrew” can be viewed from various perspectives: Shakespeare describes the explicit and implicit themes – the arranged marriages, the authority of fathers and husbands, the obedience of daughters and wives, and the economic weakness of most women. By this method, he was able to touch the lives and experiences of everyone among the audience. Although modern translators consider “Taming of the Shrew” to be a high-spirited comedy, Shakespeare's example proves that it is up to man to write, divide roles, set the scene and set the rules not only on the stage but also outside of it, in real life, as well (Kehler, 1986: 31).

Virginia Woolf also criticised Shakespeare's works, writing that Shakespeare's women were not pleasant and did not seem wanting in terms of character or personality. Besides, why was Shakespeare so famous and was able to write so many plays? Did not there any woman exist in Shakespeare's day who had Shakespeare's genius including his sister, cousin, aunt and so on? How would the story run of a woman in that days who wanted to write? Would Shakespeare's sister have got the same popularity and conditions if she had wanted to write just like Shakespeare? Would the same society have made

Shakespeare's sister as famous as Shakespeare himself? What makes Shakespeare famous is not only his ability but also his society and mainly his masculinity (Woolf, 2012: 58-61).

Aphra Behn, considered to be the first professional female English writer, was notable in Renaissance literature for her style and for overcoming male critics and trying to get out of the cultural standards and frames regarding gender rules. For this reason, her works have become a source of inspiration for all future feminist writers. Behn's work is known for her strong female protagonists and her critique of society, especially in the field of the gender issues. Her works deal with gender issues, racism, slavery, adultery, kinship and so on. In Behn's day, it took great courage for women to write with their own names and earn their living by being a writer. In addition, some literary critics criticised Behn for openly describing a woman's inner world, her desires, passion and wishes. In contrast, others thought her to be a man because they did not believe that any woman writer might be so brave.

In her play "Oroonoko, or, the Royal Slave" (1688) Behn criticises the treatment of women in both marriage and slavery, both as a group and as an individual. She tries to analyse the differences and equations between the sexes. She compares the relationship between gender and race with the difference between sex and gender to answer these questions (Behn, 1996: 219-234).

In addition to the sexual discrimination, the play discusses racial discrimination, the oppression of whites over blacks. It especially underlines the fact that being a woman alongside being black and a slave is more painful. The features of the female protagonists in Behn's work explains why the feminist writers of later years were fascinated by her. Daring to write the story of a brave woman like Oroonoko, Behn proves the importance of the female pen and she self-confidently struggles to represent women among other authors: "*But his misfortune was to fall in an obscure world, that afforded only a female pen to celebrate his fame*" (Behn, 2009: 40).

Behn's play "The Adventure of the Black Lady" also draws interest of feminist researchers. Researchers evaluate Behn's work differently; for example, Pearson believes that Behn's strong female protagonists always search for female power. They struggle with male authority to gain this power and try to establish their own dominance. In addition to strong women, Behn also provides readers with an opportunity to criticise the general condition of women by describing weak and powerless women, obedient female slaves (Pearson, 2009: 220).

Virginia Woolf emphasises the importance of Aphra Behn's female authorship and considers her a symbolic figure of female writers. However, Woolf appreciates Behn that getting no inheritance from her father to live, she didn't choose the way of marriage to live, she didn't need men to get money or make a profit with being mistress or slave for man. She chose writing to earn her living and didn't write anonymously or under a male pseudonym. Against the background of all this, the significance of Behn's works is of secondary importance for Woolf. However, in addition to her female authorship, the coverage of such nuances like presenting strong female heroes, the socio-economic status of women, the sale of women as property, sexual and racial discrimination, and so on, are particularly significant in terms of feminist theories.

Daniel Defoe played a great role in enlightening gender issues in the 18th century in England. He did not categorise women, dividing them into rich and poor, married and unmarried, and generally reflected their legal limitations and problems in his short stories, didactic works, journalistic writings, and journalistic articles. Although Daniel Defoe's most famous work is Robinson Crusoe, his plays, such as Moll Flanders, Roxanna or The Fortunate Mistress, and The Education of Women, are essential in advising women and encouraging them to get an education. In addition, Defoe wrote about the problems of women who missed school, were humiliated by their husbands in family life, and were insulted for mistakes, marriage, divorce, extramarital affairs, unwanted children, prostitution, and polygamy, motherhood, and so on. Moll Flanders (1722) is Daniel Defoe's second famous work after Robinson Crusoe. Moll Flanders, one of the earliest examples of the novel genre, sheds light on the problems of the period, and women's sin and sexuality, their passion, and those who teach morality. Defoe sees Moll Flanders as just like Robinson Crusoe, struggling to survive. Although Robinson Crusoe was alone in the middle of the

ocean, on an island, trying to survive, Moll Flanders is alone in the society in which she lives, she is as talented and capable as Crusoe, and her struggle is also to survive in the society.

In the eighteenth century, under the influence of the patriarchal system, the most honourable duty of women in England was to establish a family life. The husband was the protector, the saviour of the woman as she was a secondary being. Defoe's idea is in line with Simon de Beauvoir's philosophy of the second sex (Wipprecht, 2006: 3). Moll tries to oppose the tradition of the patriarchal system and does not accept the rule of men in society, economic dependence. For this reason, she is forced to pass through bad practices such as prostitution and thief to earn money (Defoe, 1965: 46). Moll considers that a woman must have money to be respected. Moll, who lived various marriages, lost faith in men, and was the mistress of rich and older men, says that money is the most crucial thing in life even to be respected as someone's wife. As Moll is getting mature, she sees that love has a very small share in a marriage in comparison with money "... *that money only made a woman agreeable; that men chose mistresses indeed by the gust of their affection, and it was requisite for a whore to be handsome, wellshaped, have a good mien and a graceful behaviour; but that for a wife, no deformity would shock the fancy, no ill qualities the judgment; the money was the thing; ... the money was always agreeable, whatever the wife was*" (Defoe, 1965: 63-64).

In this work, Defoe tries to show that in the eighteenth century in England the position and freedom of women who were not born in high-class families were dominated by men who maintained the tradition of patriarchal structure, women's prostitution and stealing were the result of the system, and no matter all of this Moll's struggle to survive was the main core of the work. Although being not properly clear, Defoe's Moll Flanders is considered to be a feminist work, because it conceives of women, their problems, and the descriptive nature of women's and men's desire for equality.

In Defoe's other work, "Roxanna" (1724), the author like Moll often speaks through Roxanna's language and notes untraditional ideas. The situation is slightly different in Roxanna. Roxana was born into a wealthy French family and married by her father when she was 15 years old. Roxanna's goal was to protect her money and wealth. Although Roxana, who married several times and then became a mistress of rich men, wanted to stay away from men and live single, to manage her own wealth. She was attractive to men for her beauty and youth and especially, for the money she had. Despite all the rules, Roxanna wanted women to have the same free rights as men (Defoe, 1904: 142-143). She thought – *A woman becomes lost in her husband. She has no view, interest, or aim of her own. She is forced into an indolent life and knows nothing of her husband's business. If he is a fool, she must suffer. She may be forced into misery and beggary because of her husband's mistakes* (Defoe, 1904: 145)...

In his activities as a journalist and publicistic articles Defoe advocates for women's representation in religion, education, business, and politics. In his article, "The Education of Women" (1719), he made several important points. He wrote that women should be taught to write their names from a young age instead of sewing and cooking. "Why are we afraid of an educated woman, do we see ourselves as a rival or do we think she can be more than us? An educated woman is also support for her husband, an educated woman is a friend who can give wise advice in discussions. On what basis did we take women's rights from them, why do we consider them inferior to men? Is a smart, educated woman worse than a stupid man? If knowledge and understanding were differentiated according to gender, God would not give them intelligence and the ability with distinguishing them from men. So what right do we have to keep them away from education? Isn't that unfair? It is necessary to educate women to understand the world, men and mainly to understand themselves, to acquaint them with history and literature" (12).

In the 18th century, Lady Mary Wortley Montague and Mary Astell, the lawyers who lived at the same period with Daniel Defoe, were notable with their feminist views. Though they called women to get an education and to improve themselves, some of their statements contradicted each other. For example, although Mary Wortley was a lawyer, she did not try to fully defend women's rights, she wrote that she did not want to argue for the equality of two sexes, she was doubtless thinking that both God and nature created man and woman differently and she considered that

women were obliged to obey and surrender to the superior sex. For her, it seemed foolish to waste time rebelling against the laws of the Creator and the indisputable rules of nature. Instead of this, she advised that talented women should receive a qualitative education, develop their outlook, and be able to define their interests and tastes so that not to become a toy for men, a source of entertainment or ridicule (Montagu, 1886: 176-177). Another lawyer, Mary Astell, did not accept women who felt inferior. She said that women who tried to study in such society faced some difficulties: *"She lamented that girls who overcame all the obstacles and became educated despite the existing conditions were "stared upon as Monsters, Censured, Envy and every way discouraged"* (Astell, 1706: 300). But at the same time, despite all her feminist tendencies, Mary Astell wrote that *"the woman who cannot allow her husband to "govern absolutely and entirely. . . is no way fit to be a Wife"* (Astell, 1706: 302). From this point, we understand that both woman's education and development were considered to be important not only for the woman herself but also for the improvement and protection of the general social status and family values.

The female author of the first logical and ambitious feminist work in English literature and history is considered to be a lawyer Mary Wallstonecraft (1759-1797). Wallstonecraft, sometimes called the mother of feminism by feminists, was regarded as a revolutionary feminist because she was a defender of women's rights and ambitious during a period of social and political upheaval. Although her work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), was written in response to the French Revolution, Wollstonecraft focused on women's rights, especially gender issues, which had undergone radical changes: *"It is time to effect a revolution in female manners, time to restore to them their lost dignity and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world"* (Wollstonecraft, 1985: 132). In her work *"A Vindication of the Rights of Woman"*, which is considered to be a classic of modern feminist history and feminist theory, Wollstonecraft was primarily concerned with women's right to education. She believed that women would get freedom through education. She wrote that in maintaining the stability and strength of the family chastity and loyalty of women are as important as the chastity and loyalty of men. In addition, women can enjoy having sex with men in the same way that men enjoy sex with women. Feelings and thoughts are in harmony. In addition, Wollstonecraft believed that women in society could be equal rivals to their husbands (Wollstonecraft, Lynch, 2009).

As the gender equality problem is still a topic of discussion in some areas of society the topic still keeps its relevance in the 21st century, for this reason, we can say that *"A Vindication of the Rights of Woman"* connects the 18th and 21st centuries. It should also be noted that this work and Wollstonecraft's activity as a lawyer woke up lots of women in recognition of their rights, in education and access to various opportunities in life.

### Conclusion

The attitude to the beautiful woman and her description in an early period of literature was always romantic, and imaginary. Women were economically and socially dependent on their fathers, and husbands. However, there was a call and invitation to women's education in Daniel Defoe's, Lady Mary Wortley Montague's, Mary Astell's works Mary Wallstonecraft's work *"A Vindication of the Rights of Woman"* is considered to be the turning point of feminist theory. Let's look at Victorian female writers as a case of gender studies we see that Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, etc. were afraid of not being well-received in society as female writers. That's why they wrote under the pseudonyms of men to hide their femininity. In addition, Virginia Woolf complains in *"A Room of One's Own"* (1929) that if there was a sister of Shakespeare or another woman living in the same period in the 16th century with him, perhaps she also had the ability to write. If the condition was the same with Shakespeare, if society might accept her like Shakespeare, she could be as famous as Shakespeare, or even more prominent. What makes Shakespeare so famous is not only his ability but also the view and value of society about Shakespeare.

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