

Original Article

GENDER AND POWER RELATIONS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF VICTORIAN AND CONTEMPORARY NOVELS

Dr. Rutuja P. Ghorpade ^{1*}

¹Mahila Mahavidyalaya Amravati, India



ABSTRACT

The current paper can be considered as a comparative analysis of the novels by Victorian and contemporary authors in terms of representation of gender and power relations in English literature. Being strict in terms of patriarchy and gender roles, being a woman in the Victorian world seemed to be a task that implied to the female gender the passivity and domesticity of a woman that is limited by the powers of the society. By contrast, the modern-day writings are much more indicative of changing gender roles and are questioning established structures of power, presenting not just more subtle but also more varied images of women and men. This paper identifies the transformations attained in gender relations, how inequalities in the system have been perpetuated and how ideas of feminism and postmodernism have surfaced through comparative reading of some of the works in each period. The paper sustains the argument that even though the present-day novels give the voices marginalized more agency, certain power disparities that existed historically can still be traced in the literary texts. This comparative enterprise brings to light the changing discourse of gender and power and expresses how literature is both a mirror and a maker of societal ranges of behavior.

Keywords: Gender Roles, Power Relations, Victorian Literature, Contemporary Fiction, Feminism, Patriarchy, Gender Identity, Literary Analysis

INTRODUCTION

The relationship of gender and power has been of the main interest in literary study, as literature does not merely reflect the reality in the society, but it was also part of the cultural ideology development. English literature can be a very good source of study, especially, on the process through which gender roles and power arrangements have been renegotiated at different times. As the rigidly hierarchical society of the Victorian world has been giving place to more contemporary and more questioned models of the contemporary world, the literary productions reveal the development of the identity notion, power and resistance. The purpose of this paper is to explore these shifts through the relative analysis of the gender and power relations in the Victorian and modern novels.

The social order of the Victorian period (1837-1901) was highly stratified, and was impressively imposed by industrialization, religious ethics and rigid rules of behavior. Gender roles in the era were clearly defined and justified by cultures, laws and institutional frameworks. The world of men was the world of work, politics and intellectual activities; the world of women was the world primarily of family and house. The figure of a woman, a figure of an ideal Victorian woman, was usually defined by the concept

*Corresponding Author:

Email address: Dr. Rutuja P. Ghorpade (rutujaghorpade214@gmail.com)

Received: 14 October 2025; Accepted: 28 November 2025; Published 31 December 2025

DOI: [10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i12.2025.6867](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i12.2025.6867)

Page Number: 228-233

Journal Title: International Journal of Research -GRANTHAALAYAH

Journal Abbreviation: Int. J. Res. Granthaalayah

Online ISSN: 2350-0530, Print ISSN: 2394-3629

Publisher: Granthaalayah Publications and Printers, India

Conflict of Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

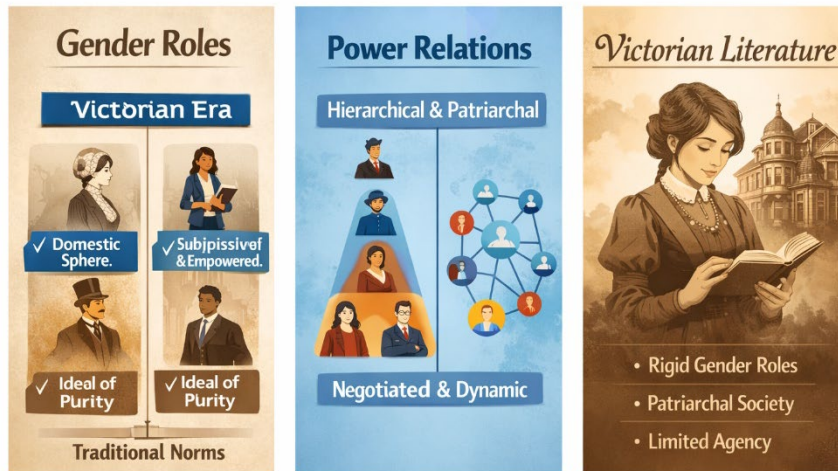
Authors' Contributions: Each author made an equal contribution to the conception and design of the study. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

Transparency: The authors affirm that this manuscript presents an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study. All essential aspects have been included, and any deviations from the original study plan have been clearly explained. The writing process strictly adhered to established ethical standards.

Copyright: © 2025 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.

of so-called Angel in the House, which had a clean mind, was modest, moral, etc. This ideology not only deprived women of their free will but it also justified their lack of representation in authority.



These norms were often reflected in Victorian novels, and female characters were subjected to the norms of patriarchy, which influenced their lives. An example is marriage which was many times presented as the end-all be-all of women, both social need and economic insurance. But these limits were implicitly criticized by numerous authors who depicted inner conflicts and rebellion of female heroes.

Women in the novels of today are depicted as autonomous and self-willful people bargaining their positions in the society. In comparison to their female counterparts in the Victorian period, modern female characters are not restricted to domestic environments but engage in professional, political, as well as, creative world. What is more, modern literature broadens the discussion of gender, including the topic of sexuality, intersectionality and non-binary identities. This inclusive attitude can be used to understand power relations in a broader, more complex way that can no longer be defined in the terms of male supremacy and female subjection.



Another important distinction is in the very conceptualization of power. Although Victorian literature is inclined to discuss power as a stable and hierarchical order, it can be seen that modern literary works tend to discuss it fluid, decentralized, and negotiable. Power is no longer considered only as domination but as a dynamic process throughout which there is resistance, adaptation and transformation. This change is consistent with the current theoretical frameworks that highlight the socially constructed character of gender and the plurality of power relations.

However, despite these developments, modern literature has no complete mastery over the effects of a historical power structure. Patriarchal ideology still exists in subtle and sophisticated forms which are often embodied in the form of internalized norms, social expectations, and the system of inequalities. Consequently, the analysis of gender and power in literature can be approached in a critical manner that accommodates both developments and developments.

This study is based on the fact that literature is a reflection and critique of the society. The comparison of the Victorian and contemporary novels will help the study determine the trends of transformation and stability in the way the questions of gender and power are represented. It attempts to help provide responses to some important questions: How has the literary depiction of gender roles changed over time? How are some modern texts opposing or supporting the conventional systems of power? And to what degree do historical ideologies still play out in the narratives of the modern?

In this comparative analysis, the paper will make a contribution to continuing debates on the literary and gender studies field, by putting light on the place of literature in de-factoring social change. The study highlights the significance of literature sources as the arenas of ideological struggle and cultural change by analyzing the interaction of gender and power in various epochs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The characters of gender and power relations in the literature have changed through time into the description of male dominance and female subordination into more complex and multi-layered interpretations. Previous literary criticism usually emphasized on how the women were depicted to be passive or oppressed and in particular, in traditional societies. The recent researches have however furthered this debate to examine the culturally specific and dynamic operations of power in subtle and dynamic terms. The articles selected to enrich this study provide the research with an excellent conceptual and informational foundation to the construction, challenge and transformation of gender and power in literary texts.

[Chiasoka \(2023\)](#) adds to this discussion by suggesting a decolonial feminism concept to a literary analysis. It states that gender oppression cannot be explained solely by patriarchy, it needs to be considered in the context of colonial past and cultural oppression. According to Chiasoka, the work of literature is normally the result of these forces of power, here; women are subdued by males and even, they are under colonial practices that determine identity, culture and social status. The approach is helpful particularly in comparative literary analysis because it is possible to introduce the differences in the ways in which gender relations diffuse in societies in an otherwise interrelated process of inequality via international systems. It also helps the readers look beyond the Western feministic models, and consider other cultural experiences in writing.

Likewise, [Conroy et al. \(2019\)](#) explore the issue of how gender and power are produced with tools of competing discourse of tradition, unity, and rights. Being framed within the context of the health studies and research, the theoretical insights are of great relevance to literature. According to the authors, power is non-existent and is a constantly negotiated one in the context of social relations and cultural beliefs. This idea can be easily applied to the preferred literary works in which the characters are likely to stand in between the traditional portrayals of their characters and the desire to start gaining their freedom. Their work can be fruitful to understand that literature is a field opposed to other ideologies on gender and puts opposite ones in one another.

The article by [Gunnarsson et al. \(2016\)](#) contributes to the argument and utilizes the critical realism framework filling the gap between social construction and material reality. Gender is produced in the process as well as being conditioned by tangible constructs of the actual world such as economics, politics and institutions. This dual nature is useful to literary analysis as it enables the researchers not only to analyze the ways in which gender can and is depicted in the texts, but also how the representations can be related to the actual conditions of the society. It indicates that there is no literature that is autonomous but literature that is highly pushed by the world, where the literature is created.

Feminist literary investigation is one of the issues [Oan \(2024\)](#) is especially worried about, because it analyses literary works of some of the authors known among the South Asians. It illustrates that women authors diagnose literature as an asset to rebel against the patriarchal norm and enact rebellion. Through personalities and stories, these authors form women who have to struggle with authority, wish to be left alone and reclaim their place in the society. This work by Oan is especially applicable to this study since it indicates how literature can be actively involved to remodel societal constructs of gender. It also points out the need to embrace non-Western views in the study of literature in order to have a more thorough understanding of gender relations.

The problem of gender and power are taken one step further by [Williams and Knudson-Martin \(2013\)](#), to the sphere of relations and interpersonal communication. Their work discloses the presence of power imbalance in the normal communication with each other, particularly in love relations. This observation has a significant part to play in literary analysis since the majority of novels reflect on the concept of personal relationships being a reflection of the aspects of the society. Through the analysis of the role of power in those relations, the paper can offer a more in-depth explanation of the mechanisms of gender inequality reproduction and opposition both on an individual and a social level.

[Mechita et al. \(2024\)](#) place the discourse into context of the modern fiction and demonstrate how the gender roles and the power system is redefined in the modern literature. They conclude that even rigid gender norms are traditionally being overlooked in the modern novels and are illustrating more elastic and diverse identities. Women have been labeled as independent and confident and the male is more sensitive and emotionally diversified in nature. The transformation of this nature can be seen as a symptom of the

broader social change and imply that literature is influenced by the changing notions of identity and power. The article assists in arguing that contemporary literature plays a key role in questioning the traditional hierarchies and more representative images.

Though both articles by [Clancy et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Petrova and Simcock \(2021\)](#) focus on energy studies, they provide us with the understanding of how the concept of gender stereotypes and power relations is embedded in the discourse. As a part of their study, they prove that even in technical subjects, gender assumptions still play a role as a factor in knowledge production and representation. This discovery has a great repercussion in the world of literary study since it stresses the need to critically study how language and stories influence our comprehension of gender. This means that literature like any other discourse can uphold or destroy the systems of power that are already in place.

[Felski \(2003\)](#) comes with a more inclusive approach to feminist literary criticism, as she does not only discuss the evolution of the discipline. Theorizing about the modern criticism, she states that it is time to get beyond merely protesting the system of patriarchy to rather appreciate the intricacy of literary works. According to Felski his feeling is that a literature must not only be valued due to its ideological worth, but we must also keep in mind the aesthetics and emotion of a literature. It is the mode of more moderated and subtle interpretation, which is imperative in both the study of Victorian and modern novels.

Finally, [Risman \(2004\)](#) is a sociological approach in the sense that he defines gender as a social order, which are manifest on a variety of levels individual level, interactional level and institutional level. This particular perception will be of particular use in the analysis of literature since the historical researcher can make her efforts twice and even thrice to comprehend how the roles of gender happen and influence the character in different circumstances and conditions. It also pinpoints the problem of power being sustained by the everyday routine along with the social institutions why it is easier to refer the issues introduced in literature to the real-life processes.

Overall, the literature surveyed has demonstrated to complicate and underdisciplined the analysis of gender and power in literature. Compared to former tools, which mainly oriented at the constitution of inequality, the more recent research findings address the negotiating and flowing power. All these show that in addition to being a reflection of the society literature is a potent tool of contestation and transformation of gender relations. This theory base assists the current study on comparative analysis of the Victorian and contemporary novels and it offers the tools and means to comprehend the continuity as well as change in the gender discourse.

1) Construction of Gender Roles

The roles of genders are strict in Victorian novels and socialized. Women are traditionally depicted as passive, nurturing, and morally superior creatures who are localized to domestic areas, whilst males are in roles of authority in a social lifestyle. The subject female identity is mostly developed in connection with the male subjects: fathers, husbands, guardians and thus posing dependency. An example is that heroines tend to live up to standards of obedience and sacrifice and any form of breaking these standards leads to either social marginalization or moral censure.

The modern novels are more flexible and diverse in their interpretation of gender roles in contrast. The characters of female sex are portrayed as independent people with their identities, dreams, and opinions. They are not limited to the domestic world anymore; they take part in the professional and social life. Moreover, modern literature is disrupting the conventional masculinity, through depicting male characters who are not only vulnerable, but also emotional. This change is indicative of a larger cultural shift of questioning and redefining gender norms.

2) Representation of Power Structures

The predominant types of power in the Victorian literature are hierarchical and patriarchal. The men possess an economic, legal and social power and the power of women is restricted and indirect. Marriage is one of the main processes that keep these relations of power and the social status of women and their security are greatly conditioned by their marriage relations. It is also possible to see that even in the cases when female characters are strong or independent, their power is limited by the social norms.

Modern literature, though, conceptualizes force in the more negotiated and dynamic form. Power is not also only concentrated in the authority figures, male, but is shared in different social and cultural spaces. There is a pattern towards women becoming more in control of their lives, pushing conventional hierarchies and redefining relationships. Further, power is shown to be functioning through discourse, identity and social interaction and not just through institutional dominance.

3) Agency and Autonomy

Agency is an essential issue of gender representation that has evolved especially when comparing the Victorian and contemporary texts. In Victorian literature, female agency is mostly restricted to inner resistance or indirect rebellion. Although in a few instances characters demonstrate dexterity and ethical prowess, their freedom of action is often limited due to extrinsic factors. Their stories frequently end with compromising, in which the needs of the person are seen as secondary to the needs of the society.

Agency is more personally stated and exercised in modern-day novels. Protagonists are female, independent, career driven and create a ruckus against derogatory structures. They do not only play passive roles to male dominance but they are real players who create their own fate. This heightened agency is indicative of the impact of a feminist ideology and the rise in the awareness of women rights in contemporary society.

4) Resistance and Subversion

Anti-establishment in Victorian literature is usually symbolic and implicit. Women who break the concept of female constraints can do it via individual sense of right, ethical bravery or passive resistance. Nevertheless, this resistance is normally within reasonable limits and it is seldom that it brings systemic change. The effects of blatant rebellion are usually dramatic, which helps to urge the restrictions placed on women.

On the contrary, modern literature foreshadows opposition as a main theme. Challenging social norms, subverting authority, and destabilizing oppressive systems, characters are active and engage in the world. This opposition does not exist as purely gender, but it is intertwined with a set of questions of class, race, and sexuality. The modern texts therefore convey a more extreme and drastic approach to social change, focusing on being able to redefine the relations of power.

5) Intersectionality and Diverse Identities

Intersectional perspectives are one of the most important achievements of the modern literature. In comparison to the Victorian texts, which in most cases revolve solely around limited expression of gender in the context of a homogenous social setup, the contemporary novels recognize the multifaceted Ness of the identity. Gender is perceived to make cross-section with other variables like class, ethnicity and sexuality and leading to various experiences of power and marginalization.

6) Continuity and Change

Although a comparative analysis of the Victorian and contemporary novels indicates much advancement in the way gender and power relations are being portrayed, it also highlights the fact that there are still some structural and ideological continuities. This fusion of change and perpetuation brings into light that the evolution of literature is not simple and that developments of the gender discourse are not linear but dynamic and stratified.

The expanded visibility and agency of female characters of the modern literature has been one of the clearest spheres of change as well. Modern female heroes do not necessarily exist in the narrow social constructs that could so often define Victorian heroines, but are frequently portrayed as confident and capable of forming their personal destinies. They defy patriarchal conventions, prove their identities and are involved in both indoor and outdoor life. This change is a part of the greater socio-cultural tendencies, such as the impact of feminist movements, legal changes, and the shifting perceptions surrounding gender equality.

Nevertheless, in spite of progress, some elements of the Victorian ideal of gender also remain in the modern narratives, although in more delicate forms. Off conservative ideas about femininity, e.g. emotional work, nurturing, the need to juggle both career and home life, etc. still linger in most contemporary texts. Even when female characters are depicted in a strong light, they are frequently rated by their relationships, appearance, or conformity to unattainable social constructs. This makes it seem that overt types of patriarchy may have died out, but unspoken norms will still cause gender representation to affect.

On the same note, change and continuity are evident in how male characters are presented as well. In more modern literature, men are being increasingly portrayed as emotional and psychologically in depth and no longer the hard and fixed masculinity of the Victorian literature. However, the demands that men be placed in positions of authority and dominance have not been completely destroyed. Male power in most storylines remains either institutional, economic, or symbolic, which shows that traditional power entities remain strong.

FINAL CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to examine how the relationship between gender and power comes about in the English literature, through the study of the Victorian and the contemporary novels. The results unveil a noticeable direction of change of the inflexible patriarchal systems to more flexible, variety-filled, and controversial images of gender. At the same time, it can be demonstrated in the analysis that such transformation is not completely homogeneous and complete in the sense that the components of the historical inequality continue to operate within modern literary discourses.

The Victorian literature has been a reflection of the social hierarchy, which is founded on the rigid gender roles and-hierarchical structure of power. The women were primarily confined in their homes with their personality founded on the premise of purity, obedience and dependence. Marriage, law and religion were institutions that put in to the hands of the male authority all the power. Despite the fact that a part of authors was initially mentally challenged on the basis of these structures, literary discourse and most of the literary publications were supporting patriarchate, narrowing the female agency as well as endorsing the gender-based inequalities.

On the other hand, change in the way gender and power are depicted, not to mention how they are conceptualized is one of monumental shift in the contemporary literature. The female characters are increasingly becoming independent, assertive and self-directed and bargaining the case at the society. The picture of power as a strict hierarchical system has been changed as one that is stream like in its relation and negotiation, and renegotiation inability. It is also possible to expand the gender discourse with the current texts, introducing the intersectional frames of thinking, considering a complex relationship between gender, classes, race, and sexuality.

The study however mentions the continuity of certain ideological continuities as well. Even though things have become more visible and people are equally empowered, there tend to be some invisible means of constraint like internalized norms, expectations in a society or even existence of institutional inequalities that still exist. This signifies that despite the disappearance of conspicuous patriarchy redemptive vices, there is diffusion of power structures in literature work, and social facts.

The existence of alteration and permanence accentuate the complexity of the discourse on gender in books. The modern novel neither completely negates the old but rather carries out a dialogue with it and supports the old at the same time challenging it and making it new. The evolution of the literature, then, becomes a decisive sphere, in which not only are reflected the relationships of power, but absolutely criticized and turned into something other.

In conclusion, it can be reiterated that this comparative analogy study affirms that English literature plays a critical role in documenting and defining the shift in technology of genders, and power relations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Chiasoka, A. F. (2023). Decolonial Feminism and Gender in Literature: Challenging Patriarchal and Colonial Power Structures. *Literature and Linguistics Journal*.
- Clancy, J. S., Skutsch, M., and Batchelor, S. (2018). Gender Myths in Energy Poverty literature: A critical discourse analysis. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 38, 9–18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2018.01.010>
- Conroy, A. A., Ruark, A., and Tan, J. Y. (2019). Re-Conceptualising Gender and Power Relations for Sexual and Reproductive Health: Contrasting Narratives of Tradition, Unity, and Rights. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 22 (Suppl 1), 48–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2019.1666428>
- Felski, R. (2003). Literature After Feminism. *American Literary History*, 15(1), 108–127. <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/15.1.108>
- Gunnarsson, L., Martinez Dy, A., and van Ingen, M. (2016). Critical Realism, Gender and Feminism: Exchanges, Challenges, Synergies. *Journal of Critical Realism*, 15(5), 433–439. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2016.1211442>
- Mechita, U., Kalita, P., Choudhury, M., Satola, D., and Sharma, V. (2024). Feminist Reimaginings in 21st Century British Fiction: A Study of Gender and Power in Contemporary Novels. *American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation*. <https://doi.org/10.69980/ajpr.v28i1.85>
- Oan, M. N. (2024). Feminist Literary Inquiry: Analyzing Gender Dynamics in the Works of Begum Rokeya and Anita Desai. *ABC Journal of Advanced Research*, 13(2), 57–68. <https://doi.org/10.18034/abcjar.v13i2.798>
- Petrova, S., and Simcock, N. (2021). Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Critiques in Energy Research: A Review and Call for Transversal Thinking. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 75, 102005. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2021.102005>
- Risman, B. J. (2004). Gender as a Social Structure: Theory Wrestling with Activism. *Gender & Society*, 18(4), 429–450. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243204265349>
- Williams, K., and Knudson-Martin, C. (2013). Do Therapists Address Gender and Power in Infidelity? A Feminist Analysis of the Treatment Literature. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 39(3), 271–284. <https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1752-0606.2012.00303.x>