

**Representation of
Women in Literature:
Problems and Diversions**

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Representation of Women in Literature: Problems and Diversions

Abstract:

Literature is often seen as a means for the creative artist to express their views. However, it plays a more important role- that of representing the society. This project is concerned with this aspect of literature. It compares major works in English Literature across three centuries- 18th, 19th, and 20th to evaluate how women were portrayed in literature and to what extent such portrayals influenced society. The project also analyses data collected from individuals across the world who are familiar with English Literature to look at the public opinion regarding the Representation of Women in Literature. The major findings from the research were that more than 80% of respondents have come across texts discriminatory against women, both in subtle and conspicuous ways, and the popular opinion is that a lot of work still needs to be done to ensure well balanced representation of women in literature.

Introduction

If we wish to define literature, which is very important to fully understand the content of this project, we could start with one of the most common, but also perhaps the most important function of literature: "Literature is the reflection of society," (Aristotle, Poetics). And taking it a step further, literature can also be seen as "the lens of the human mind," or "a stimulation to the senses to think and feel."

With this basic construct of literature in general, let us move ahead towards what can be seen as the watershed period in English literature. When we say that literature is the "reflection of society," what we also need to realize is that literature does not simply reflect the "good" and "bad" aspects of society. Dynamic literature also points out *what changes can be brought about* in society, so as to move towards a more progressive vision. Such dynamic literary pieces are "living texts," as they can be as relevant a hundred years later as they were when first composed.

Moreover, the opposite is also true. Other than being the reflection of society, literature also impacts how people view the society, and how their interactions and perceptions are coloured.

Materials and Methods:

The Methodology used for this project can be divided into two parts:

- I. Analysis of Secondary Data: Data available on various reliable sources and archives on the internet regarding the literature of the concerned three periods were collected and analyzed.
- II. Analysis of primary data: Data collected from survey respondents across the world was analyzed through data visualization.

I. The Eighteenth Century (1700s)

If literature is a "reflection of society," then to understand literature, we would first need to understand the societal context. The seventeenth century was the time of tumultuous changes- societal, and political. In Europe, the surge to demolish monarchical powers in favour of more liberal governments had already begun, with the French revolution and the establishment of the constitutional monarchy in France. Even still, women were allowed to play only a limited role, with the first known attempt at a French Constitution titled "Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen" with no voting rights to women. At the same time, ideas of philosophers and thinkers like John Locke and Montesquieu started spreading at this time which also inspired the waves of women empowerment to come.

This particular time period was also the escalation of the time of the "printed word" which meant that ideas and literary pieces could circulate faster than before and reach a wider audience, the literate, as well the illiterate, through oral reading gatherings.

II. The Nineteenth Century:

The fight for a democratic society continued, inspired by the USA's success, and women gaining the right to vote due to the suffrage movement. In this period, the institution of marriage and sexual division of labour came to be seen more and more as shackles that subjected women to traditional degradation and humiliation and did not allow them to achieve even a fraction of their full potential. This was also the time when feminist works mostly by female authors with strong female characters as opposed to the traditional "gentle and weak, easily subdued" female characters came to the forefront. These authors would often take male pen names to publish their work, for better chance of them being socially accepted and treated seriously. The "womanly virtues" that made a woman "desirable" had also started to be questioned through these literary

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works. Religious networks and institutions, for example the Catholic Church, could be seen becoming more anxious and releasing lists of banned texts with threats of punishment and "outcasting from religion" in cases of violation of these "edicts." This was because they were well aware that such revolutionary texts could pose a threat to their centuries of consolidated authoritarian power.

III. The Twentieth Century

The socio-political environment in the 20th century was marked by large-scale violence, with both world wars, atomic destruction and nationalist movements in colonies to take back their freedom happening simultaneously. At the same time, there were groups, for instance, Nazi Germany, trying, among other things, to destroy the limited progress being made in allowing liberty, dignity and freedom of choice for women. The literature of this time was heavily influenced by these aspects.

IV. Comparing works of Literature

One of the first works that would come to our mind while talking of feminist texts and strong female characters in this period would be "Pride and Prejudice" by Jane Austen. Not just "Pride and Prejudice," but the overarching themes in most of Austen's work are Gender, Feminism, Sexuality and Economic position of women, themes people till then had not really had much access to.

Mary Ann Evans, an English author well known for the psychological depth of her characters, had to undertake the pen name of "George Eliot." Margaret Mitchell and George Bernard Shaw, through "Gone With the Wind," and "Arms and the Man" respectively among other works, were authors speaking up against war, slavery (physical and emotional) and sexism.

Coming to more contemporary times, bell hooks and Virginia Woolf among others, in the 20th century, carried on the legacy of the feminist voice, adding their own elements and ideas in concurrence with the current societal situation.

However, just looking at the literature of the time period in focus will not give us the picture of the larger struggle. After all, non-feminist literature has a longer history than feminist literature at large. This can be better explained through the instance of the work considered the first ever

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English novel, "Pamela," or "Virtue Rewarded," by Samuel Richardson. Though it is meant to be a "moral novel," inherent themes of harassment and sexism are woven into it as the way the "virtue" of the protagonist is "rewarded" is that she gets to marry her assaulter for remaining "pure and innocent." English Literature students are almost compulsorily exposed to this novel as a part of their syllabus in college. The problem is that, even in the 21st century, instead of encouraging debate and discourse around these themes, it is still often taught in a sexist manner, and students trying to speak otherwise are shut down.

(Reference: Daniella Gaskell, How One Of The Most Sexist Books Of All Time Is Still Being Used To Silence Women)

Coming to works of literature that are famous for their vivid themes, or might even seem feminist, while their progressive aspects are for us to appreciate, that does not, in any way mean that we are not to point out and discuss the inherent biases.

For example, if we take the very famous novel "Little Women" and its sequels by Louisa May Alcott, Jo, the protagonist, herself disregards traditional "feminine" notions of conduct, but judges other women for doing the same. In famous children's novel "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," by Mark Twain, we have every female character being dismissed as a shrew, a bimbo, or a nag.

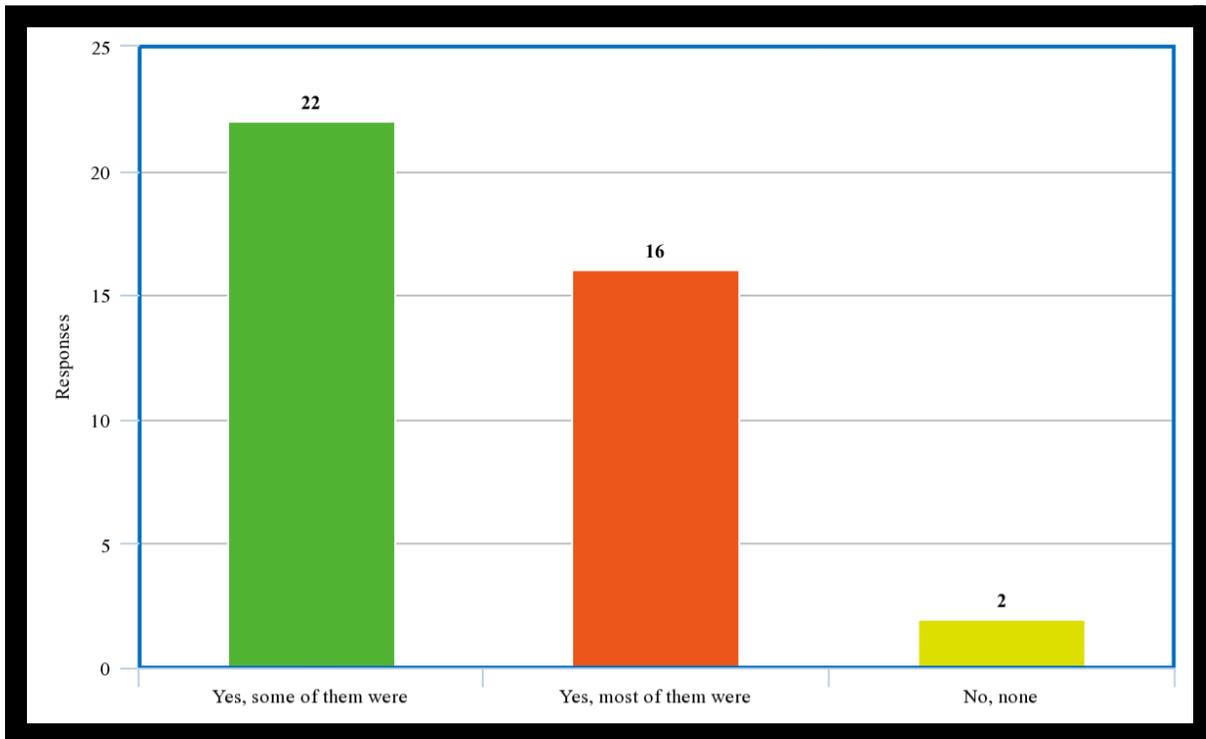
While we might consciously or unconsciously overlook these aspects because of the social perception of these literary works, that does not mean they do not exist, or that they do not hold the power to influence our thinking in the long run.

Survey Report:

A Google form Survey was disseminated through social media for the purpose of the project. 40 individuals across the world in the age range 15-60 years took the survey. This group of survey respondents consists of high school students, university students as well as working professionals. These individuals were from India, The United States of America, Canada, Singapore, Kosovo and Belarus. No personal data was compulsory to be inputted and respondents were given the option to stop filling out the survey at any point. All research ethics were followed while collecting data, the consent of respondents was obtained and the data has been used anonymously.

Results:

Q: Looking back, do you feel that any of the nursery rhymes/ stories/ fairy tales you heard/ read during childhood were sexist/ stereotypical towards women?

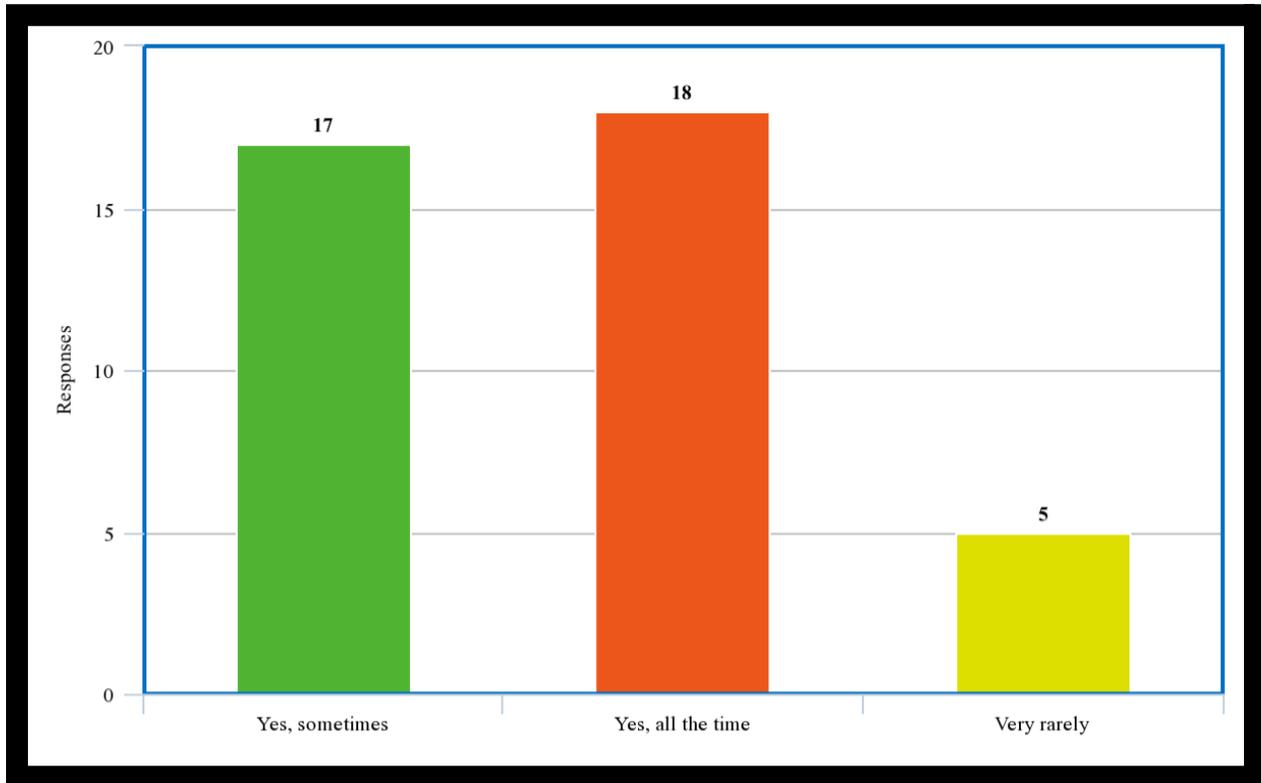


As we can see, 95% of respondents feel that, in some way or the other, nursery rhymes or fairy tales that they were exposed to when young were sexist. Only 5% feel that this was not the case. Since the majority opinion is from people across the world, we can understand that most children are exposed to such texts from a very young age, which might subconsciously lead them to develop prejudiced views later. When asked to explain the reason behind their opinion, some responses were, *"There were of course stereotypes about females, about how they should be, looks, act, what they should do, and what their dreams should be. The idea of femininity was made a limited one, and the female characters that broke these stereotypes were often labelled as 'tomboys' who belittled the feminine traits, creating a situation where people either had a shallow understanding of femininity, or they disregarded feminine traits,"* and *"Disney Movies- Most of them portray women as the feeble weak young girl who will be saved by Prince Charming. The villain is most definitely female showing that anyone who deviates from the general norm of the society is viewed in a very derogatory manner. Eg. The Little Mermaid, Sleeping Beauty. Even nursery rhymes like Baa Baa Black sheep portrays the male counterpart*

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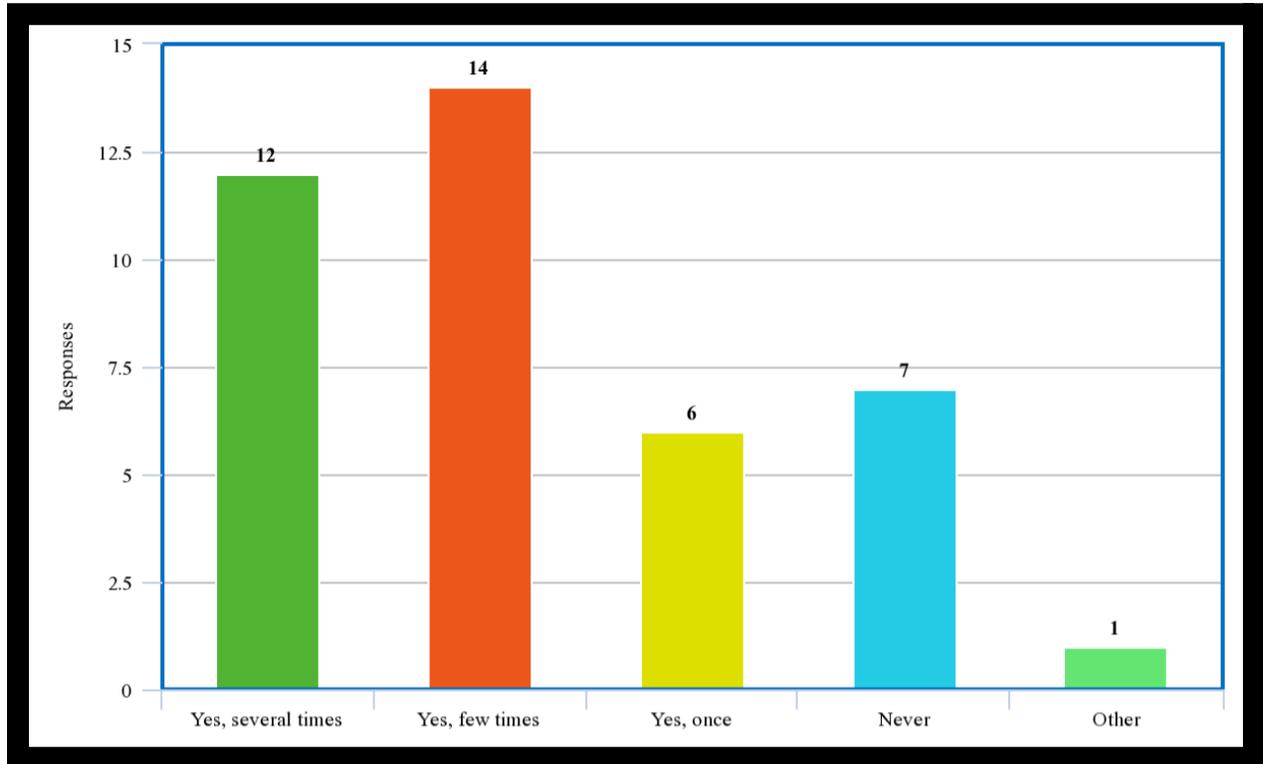
as the master while his wife is seen as an object, a property (one for 'his' dame)." Basically, the respondents spoke of the gender stereotypes and gender roles emphasised by these pieces.

Q: Do you think the position of women in society is reflected in the literature of that time?



Again, the majority, that is, 87.5% of respondents believe that the status of women in society is represented in literature of the time. 42.5% believe it is sometimes represented in literature, while 45% feel it is represented all the time. Only 12.5% feel that this is not the case. When asked to further elaborate upon their opinion, respondents said, "*Women were always present in literature of that time, in romantic novel, story books, etc. Most often the scene with women was that they had some kind of problems going on and were weak and then magically a strong prince (also known as My Mr. Right) will come fall in love with her and vanish away all her problem, will marry her and then what? Happy Ending, typical!*" "*For example in A Doll's House and Death of a Salesman the women portrayed (wives) are always seen serving their husband and taking care of the household,*" and "*Writers usually write from their societal point of view. Even books set in the future imagining a new kind of society still usually reflect the author's time period of what is progressive. Look at Asimov's Foundation series set centuries into the future...the idea of breaking the mold in women is still presented in rather sexist framework. If we judge from a present day stand point. But perhaps in his time he may have been seen as progressive.*"

Q: Have you come across a sexist/ misogynist / discriminatory against women text in your school/ college curriculum/ syllabus?



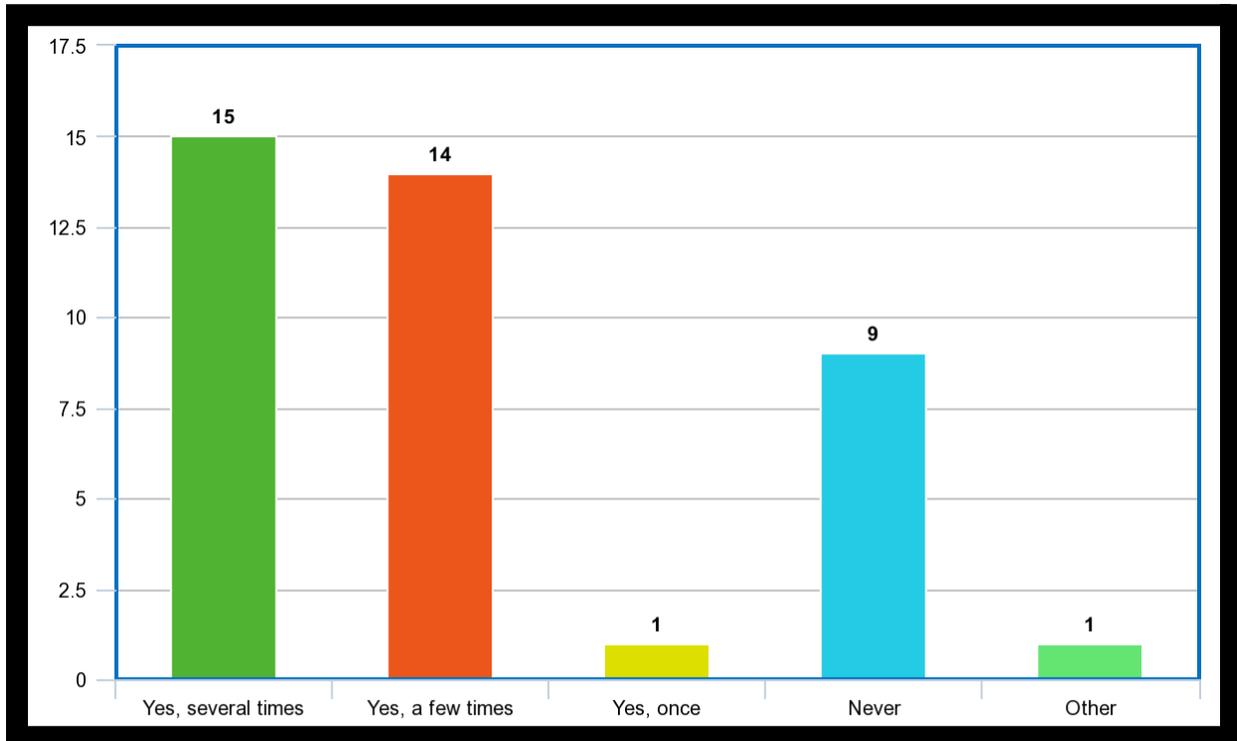
30% of respondents said that they had come across a sexist/misogynistic text several times in their school/ college curriculum..35% said they had come across the same a few times, 15% said once. The 2.5% who said "Other" said, "A few times in more insidious ways. Very few times as overtly misogynist/discriminatory." Thus, the majority (82.5%) have had such an experience. Only 17.5% said that this was something they had never come across. This makes it clear that even seemingly harmless school texts often have such misogynistic ideas incorporated. When asked to explain, one respondent spoke about an exam paper which had an unseen comprehension passage which implied that "*Children are getting spoiled because mothers are going out to work.*" Many students also sued the exam organisers. Others said, "*I think Ranga's Marriage is one of the biggest examples of this, not only portraying the harsh reality of patriarchy but also the dark side of child marriage, which is considered so very normal even today in rural India. Similarly Should Wizard Hit Mommy also shows how the unquestioned superiority of males affect them in a patriarchal setting, them expecting women to hold on to every word that they ask them to,*" and "*Most obviously in 1984- the female love interest only expressed rebellion through sex and that was what her entire character seemed to revolve around.*" One respondent, who said they had been exposed to such texts in school several times, when asked to explain, said, "*It's a family matter I am not allowed to talk.*" This shows that even

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though people realise that a particular piece of literature is misogynistic, they often choose not to talk about it either because of restrictions imposed by family, or because they still believe that these stereotypes are "normal."

Further, the respondents who had come across such texts were asked if they were given enough freedom to discuss and speak out against the same in the classroom. 33.33% said that they were given a lot of freedom, 28.57% said that they were only briefly allowed to talk about it, 9.52% said that they tried to speak out but were shut down, 2.38% said they were not allowed to speak at all and the 2% who responded other said that they could not speak out because they were scared. This time, there is only a narrow majority who had the freedom to speak, which again reflects our societal norms.

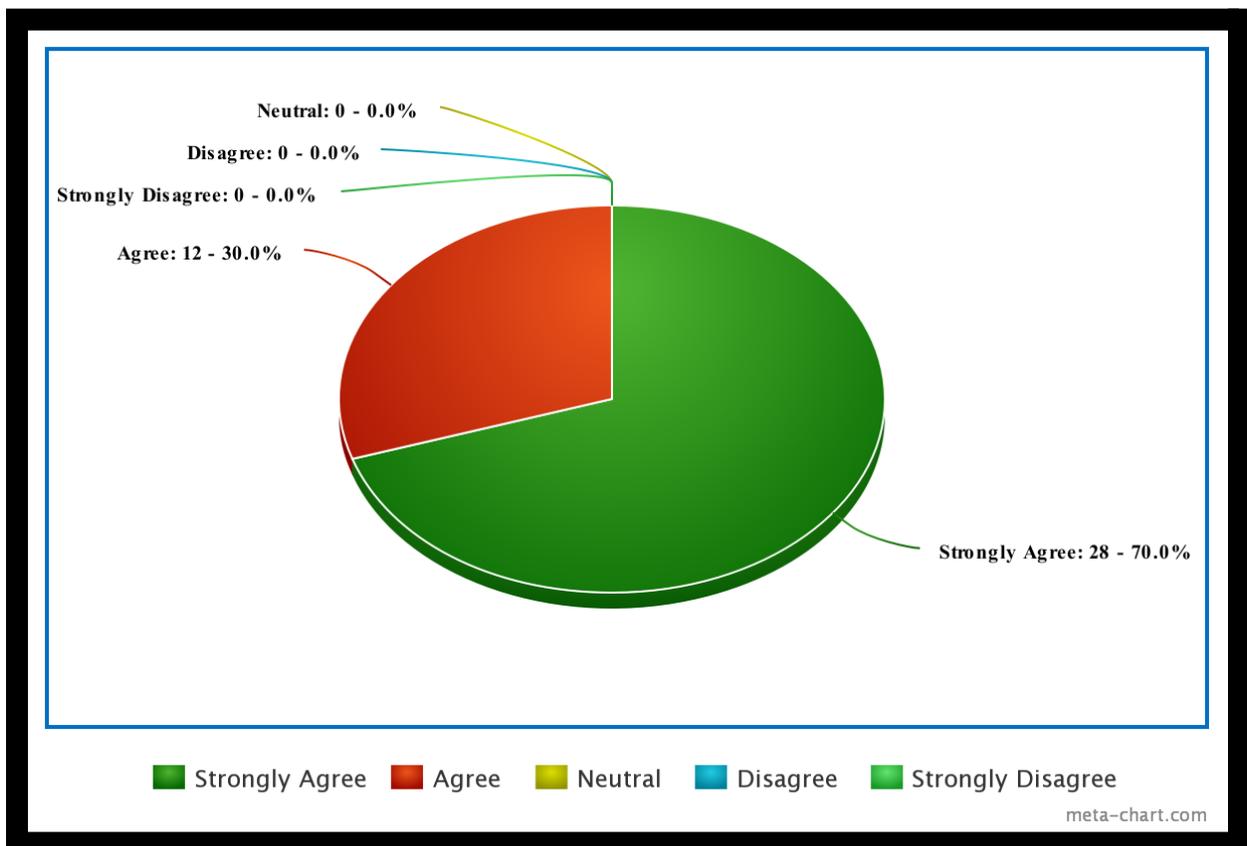
Q: Have you come across a sexist advertisement/literary piece outside of school?



In total, 75% of the respondents said they had come across a sexist advertisement/ literary piece outside of school, out of which majority had had such an experience several times. The 2.5% who responded "Other" said that they had not come across such advertisements, but are positive that they must be published in abundance. Only 22.5% said that they had never had such an experience. The respondents further explained, "Advertisements for bodycare, jewelry, and home appliance brands. According to them only women need these and hence the models and the taglines revolve around making women more beautiful and their household work easier. In restaurants, the men are approached first or given the bill," and "Advertisement which show families often have typical gender roles. Though now a days ad companies try and deliberately make different choices in the gender roles."

Q: The representation of women in literature can influence people to think in a particular way/ develop prejudices:

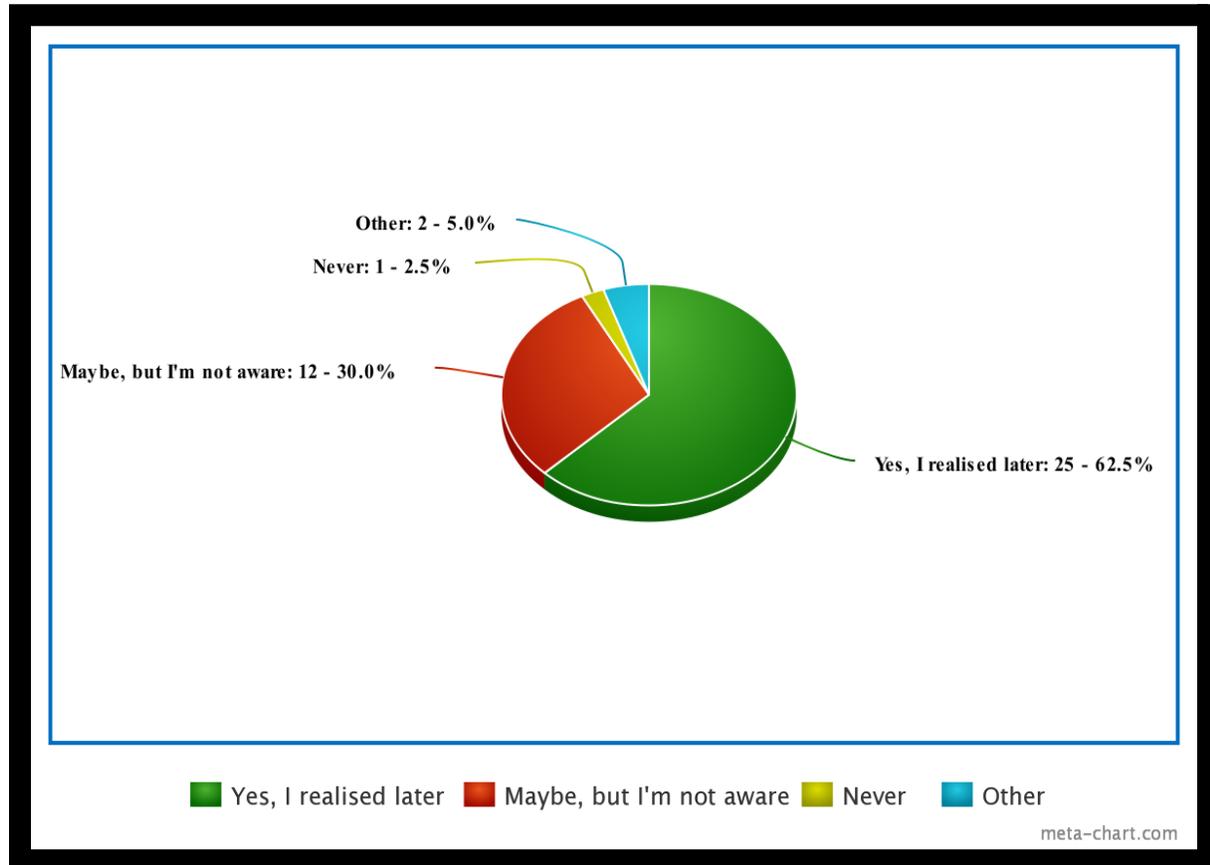
- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree



As is very evident from the pie chart, every one of the respondents believes that how women are represented in literature definitely impacts how people think/develop prejudices. The only difference is that some "Strongly Agree" with the statement while some "Agree" but no one disagrees.

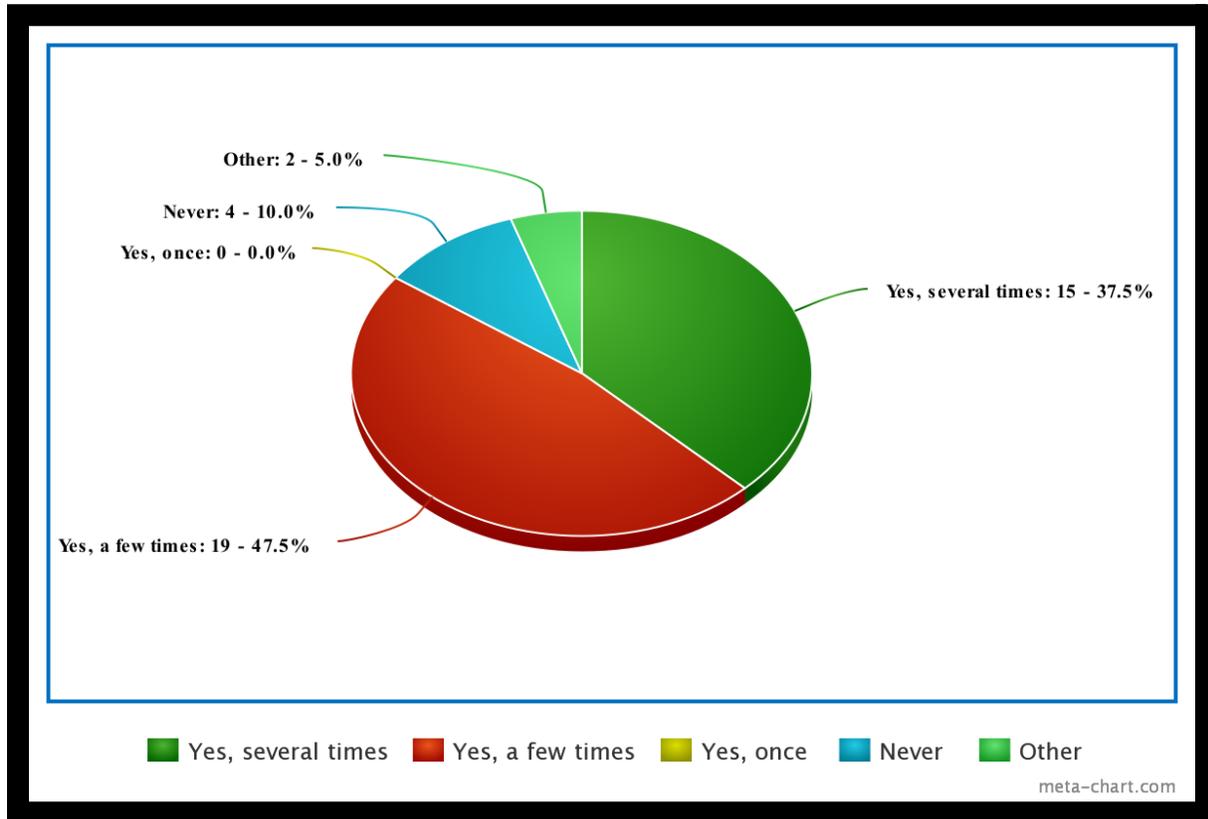
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Q: Do you think any of the kinds of texts mentioned above has caused you to develop a prejudice or believe in a stereotype about how women should be/ should do/ should behave?



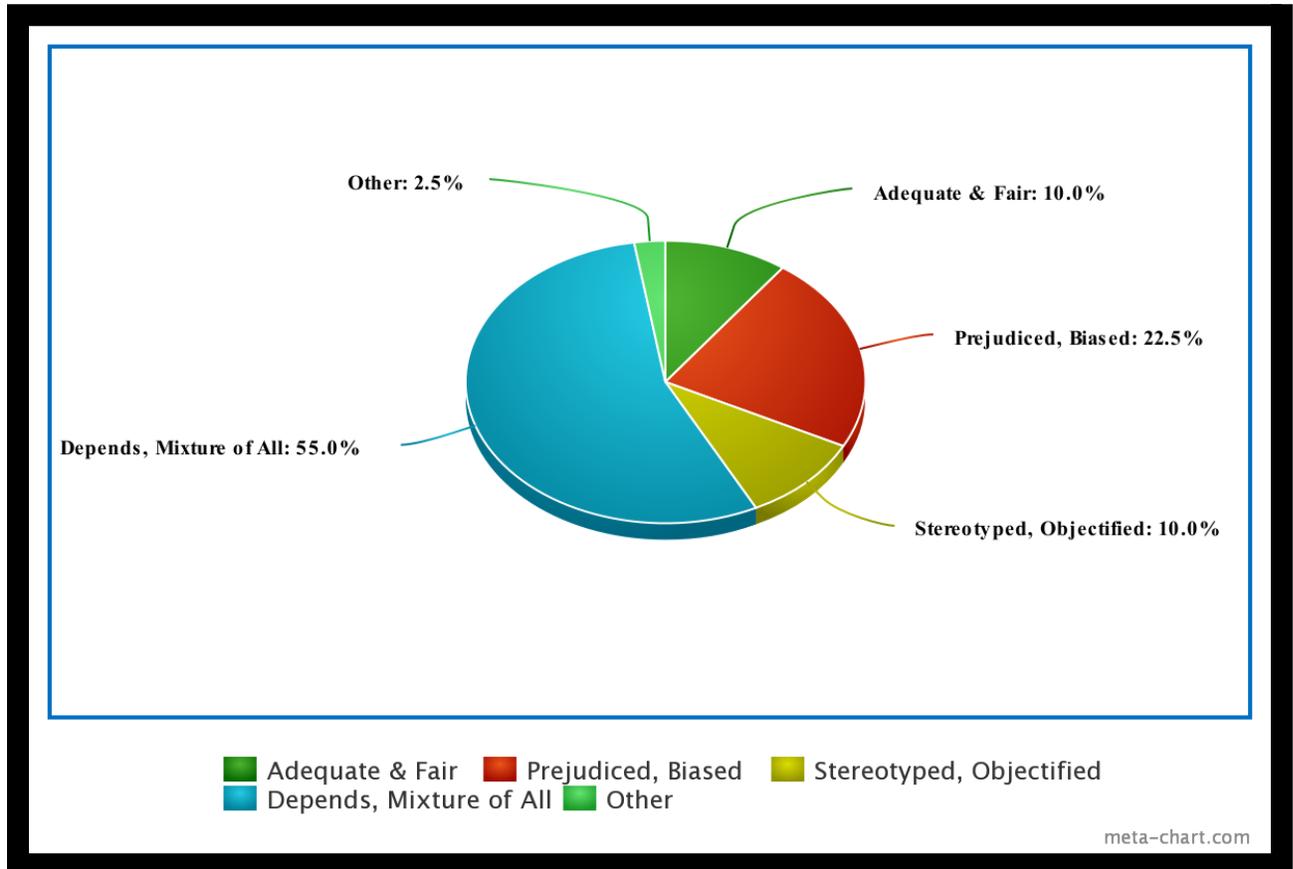
This shows that 62.5% respondents had developed a stereotype about how women should behave because of the literature they had been exposed to and only realised it later. 30% feel that such an instance could have happened to them but they are yet not aware of the same, while 2.5% believe that they have never been in such a situation. The 5% who responded "Other" said that this might be possible, but it is not just literature that is responsible for causing this prejudice.

Q: Are there times when you have felt that a text could easily be changed in a particular way to make it non-discriminatory towards women?



Clearly, 85% of the respondents have felt more than once that certain elements of a certain text could easily be tweaked to make it non-discriminatory and balanced. Thus it becomes clear that it is because of pre-existing biases in society that sexist ideas are reflected in literature. The 5% who responded "Other" said that however, this is not always possible, as sometimes the ideas run deep throughout the texts and form their foundation. When asked to explain, respondents said, *"With the process of socialisation since our childhood, we imbibe such values from media and print without even questioning it. these discriminatory ideas passed down by generations are absorbed by the newer generations without asking why. but with the advent of technology and the emergence of 'woke' culture, the gen z individuals have really started to break down these texts and media to reveal the hidden sexism and misogyny and spreading such awareness has caused enlightenment for all of the unnoticed exploitation they went through minutely in daily life,"* and *"A great example of literary works dictating how women should be is painting the female protagonist as a damsel in distress more often than not. Women are often portrayed as too weak to be able to get themselves out of a problem. It makes children romanticise the idea of being saved by others, rather than learning to help themselves.*

Q: What do you think about representation of women in literature in YOUR TIMES in general?



Only 10% seem to believe that the representation of women in their times is Adequate and Fair. 32.5% believe that in some way or the other, the representation of women in literature in their times in general is discriminatory, either "Prejudiced and Biased" or "Stereotypical and Objectified." However, the majority, 55%, seem to believe that it is a mixture of all of the above, a balanced view. The 2.5% who responded "Other," said, "*Women are often adequately represented but always in one way: the fierce girl who can fight.*"

When asked to elaborate upon their viewpoints, the respondents said, "*The very fact that most of the books continue to have male leads and females are mostly considered to be 'sidekicks' or in most detective novels, the main detective is a male character or the common practice of having more male characters than females in such a group leads to stereotypes and questioning of the potential of women in a very subtle way that is either overlooked or considered very normal, thus never questioned,*" "*Again, this often depends on the author, and in many books you can find well-written and complex female characters, but still, to a large extent, women are seen as either*

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black or white, the former representing women who fit into all the stereotypes of femininity, and the latter being representative of women who reject all of those stereotypes. Often the women who fit into/indulge in said stereotypes are demonised or shown as shallow, and flat, whereas that is not the case. Many writers still struggle to understand that women are just like other humans, with complex emotions, preferences and individuality. You cannot fit every female character into either of these two stereotypes" and "As society has grown more progressive, there have been improvements in the role women play in literature, but the women represented are still mostly white, higher socioeconomic class, able-bodied," "In certain circles and media, especially ones written by women, women are fairly represented and nuanced! There are some situations in male-dominated media (esp. movies) where they aren't but I don't think there's direct sexism or misogyny anymore. It's largely that female characters are ignored or undervalued if anything."

Conclusion

The timeline of the study begins in the period considered to be the watershed in women's representation in English literature- the 18th century. This was the time when people actually started recognising that the way women are treated in society, and the way that they are represented in literature in general, are biased and discriminatory, and against the principles of basic human dignity and morality. This was also the time that saw the emergence of many women writers who took to developing nuanced, independent female characters in defiance of the social norms of the time. This legacy of protest against centuries of patriarchal norms continued throughout the 19th and 20th century. A comparative study of famous literature created during these three periods reveals the same.

A close study of people's opinion across the world reveals that most of the respondents had come across pieces of literature in school or otherwise, which portrayed sexist and misogynistic ideas. The same goes for advertisements too. For example, in India, there was an advertisement advocating for the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community which had to be struck down because of popular protest. Many of the respondents also said that they were not given freedom to speak out against such elements. Most of them believe that women's representation in literature affects how people view women and vice versa and that they themselves had developed prejudices and stereotypes with regard to how women should behave because of the kind of literature they were exposed to. Most of the respondents also feel that the representation of women in literature has made some progress towards being balanced, but is still stereotypical and objectified to a large extent, and has a long way to go.

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Thus, it is high time that we come out of the blindfold society has placed on us and recognise the right to freedom, equality and dignity of every individual, and work towards achieving it.

Recommendations and Further Research

Borrowing from the findings in this paper, it is very evident that the way forward is not just to be mindful of what we are creating (literature) but what we read and how we interpret it as well. While it is true that what finds a mention in influential literature has an impact on society, it is also true that what happens in society influences literature. Thus, it is up to us to set the standards, make the revisions, and take the steps that should be taken. For example, it is high time that educational authorities re-evaluate and revise the content of school textbooks in order to ensure that the prejudices that have been passed down for centuries are not carried forward anymore.

Some questions for further research:

- Can a study of biased literature pave the way for creation of unbiased pieces?
- To what extent are authors willing to go against the norms of society to ensure balanced representation in literature?
- Why do prejudices in current society find a place in futuristic literature as well?

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