

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the change in the image and status of women in the popular English novel in the period from 19th century to the early 20th century. It explores the different novelistic treatment of women's characters in relation to their level of intelligence and their roles in the popular fiction of the period. It shows that how traditionally men have always been the protagonists and presented as principal characters in the novel. There had usually been an archetypal character of 'wise old man,' who usually appeared as a central and dominating figure in the guise of patriarch, sage, king, lord or a person of high religious or social rank in the literature before 20 century. Writers used to attribute wisdom and power to such characters. Early prose fiction of John Bunyan and Laurence Sterne show this trend dominantly. This tradition of showing men as the source of wisdom prevailed till the end of the 19 century. However, under the influence of drastic social changes of the time, modern novelists D. H. Lawrence, Henry James, E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf brought changes in the traditional paradigm of female portrayal. They introduced the character of a 'wise old woman' who replaced archetypal 'wise old man.' This idea reaches its culmination in the works of Woolf. In one of her early works *Jacob's Room* she uses the term "the wise old woman" for Mrs. Pascoe. Her later works *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* exhibit more perfect models of feminine wisdom in the characters of Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay.

This thesis, in other words, is a study of change from Bunyan's 'Mr. Wiseman' to Woolf's 'Wise old woman.' It discusses the characters of Mrs. Moore in *A Passage to India* and Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* in detail who are the most famous characters in early twentieth-century English novel. They subvert the myth of male wisdom, and establish the female dominancy in the spheres of intellect and reason. They being wise persons play their vital roles for strengthening the relationships among the other characters in their respective stories and ultimately become symbols of unity and harmony. Although, they do not have visible power in the world of men, their wise response to the problematic situations and events prove their triumph overtly and show them as protagonists in their respective novels. That is why they continue to influence others, even after their deaths in the novels.

This thesis further finds out the influences of changing social, economic and political context on the representation of women in the fiction. It discusses that how these changes and historical events like Feminist Movement, Modernism and First World War caused the change in women's status in the society and subsequently in the novel.