



## Gender and Narrative Strategies: A Case Study of *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*

Prof. Ch.A.Rajendra Prasad

Department of English and Communications, Dravidian University, Kuppam – 517426, AP

**Abstract :** Notwithstanding the proto-feminist concerns of Tolstoy and Flaubert, for which the authors have remained as pioneers of championing the Cause of Women, the paper explores how Tolstoy and Flaubert seem to have succumbed, at the end of the day, to the pressure of patriarchy which obviously monitors the narrative strategies adopted by these iconic authors. Hence an attempt is made to unveil the 'gendered mind' of the classic writers in spite of the soft corner they carried in their 'heart' for the women characters in their writings. The gendering of their mind is so deep and ubiquitous during their times, it is in fact, possible for them not to have been very much conscious of their mindset. But the gendered mindset is obviously 'at work' in their craft of writing. This is betrayed in the "endings they decided to give to the woman protagonists of the classics.

**Keywords:** Gendering the Un-gendered; Narrative Strategy and Craft of Work; Story Narratology and Discourse Narratology; Hypothetical Narrative Syntax.

This paper attempts 'to gender' classics which are supposedly not gendered though in reality are already gendered in their 'inception and making by the writers/times. This attempt doesn't intend to belittle the master writers avowed concerns for humanity and life in general. But the paper tries mainly to point out the insidious creeping of the gendered mindset and its overpowering and shaping impact on the writers and their narrative. Secondly, the paper tries to 'see through the collaborative universalist critical interpretations and the attending vested interests of classics like *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*. Thirdly, the paper traces the 'turn' in the tide made by women philosophers/writers with their

paying back in the same currency by exploiting the narrative devices to the advantage of women protagonists and to undo the supposed "natural man supremacy. Finally, the researcher views the contemporary women writings as affirmative action in the cause of Woman in the realm of creative writing.

Since two of the key terms of this paper are 'gender' and 'narrative' it is obligatory to look at them critically. Anne Oakley attempts at defining the concept of gender as socially constructed masculinity and femininity. Masculinity and femininity are defined not by biology by social, cultural and psychological attributes which are acquired through becoming a man or woman in a particular society at a



particular time." (Contemporary Feminist Theories: 133)

Though the story of 'gendering' of human thinking and literary process is age-old, and notwithstanding the occasional covert debunking of the same has been there, a formal and incisive exposing of the 'androcentric mind-set took place with the publications made by first generation feminist writers like Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Simon de Beauvoir and Mary

Ellman. Among these, Simon de Behaviour's *The Second Sex*, published in 1949. gave the decisive stroke that dismantled the essential and innate duplicity that encapsulated the whole androcentric outlook. The crux of the argument of the book can be off be sunted in a single line: "One is not born a woman but becomes one." Among the second generation feminist writers/philosophers, proper gynocriticism in literature got initiated with Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* in 1970's with yet another master stroke, "Personal is political".

A more comprehensive and illustrated study of liberation made by female writers, beginning from 18th century onwards, from the suffocating hold of "patriarchal poetics" and the given "female literary tradition"-women as angels and monsters-was revealingly done by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their book with thought provoking title, *The Mad Woman in the Attic*. The summing up of the first chapter of this book in a way evidence the women critics' attempt to 'gender' the whole western literary tradition:

"In their attempts at the escape that the female pen offers from the prison of the male text. women like Aurora Leigh and Mary Elizabeth Coleridge begin... by alternately defining themselves as angel-women or as monster-women. Like Snow White and the Wicked Queen, their

earliest impulses... are ambivalent.... Yet, despite the obstacles presented by those twin images of angel and monster, despite the fears of sterility and the anxieties of authorship from which women have suffered, generations of texts have been possible fro female writers. By the end of the 18th century... women were not only writing, they were conceiving fictional worlds in which patriarchal images and conventions were severely, radically revised.... self-conceiving women from Anne Finch and Anne Elliot to Emily Bronte and Emily Dickinson rose from the glass coffin of the male-authored text... (44)"

What is narrative then? Is it an innocent and unqualified attempt at telling/narrating? In the words of Gerald Genette: "The study of narrative as a verbal mode of representation of temporally ordered situation and events." (Emphasis mine) (Dictionary of Narratology 65) Here what are significant are temporality and ordering. These elements inadvertently underscore a writer's ability to manipulate the timing and duration of incidents of a text, and secondly the way the events can appear in the text.

Further, any narrative implies two components-Story Narratology and Discourse Narratology. Distinguishing between these two components that constitute a literary text brings to light a crucial factor on the part of the writer-choosing a theme that he or she likes, and presenting it in his or her chosen perspective. This issue has come to forefront with an important change that has taken place in the contemporary critical canon that may be termed as "narrative turn". The focus on narrative turn has brought to light many hidden factors in relation to the making of a literary work. In fact, "narrative turn" has been made possible through the



emergence of Structuralist and Post-Structuralist schools of criticism, which actually helped to "to develop a science of literature." (Abrams: 281)

One of the fall-outs of the "narrative turn" is becoming conscious of the narration process of a literary work. Being conscious of the narration process helps us to see the hidden factors that go into the making of a literary work. The x-raying of a literary work unveils the hidden binary oppositions that constitute the bone structure of a work. One of the obvious bone structures is 'Man over Woman.' Many of the classics do have the bone-structure in the name of binary opposition as Man over Woman. Notwithstanding this supporting hidden edifice, classical works, all the while, have successfully posed as universalist works, beyond the reach and/or above gender biases, representing just 'the just' the universal concerns. As has been stated above, with the outbreak of narrative outlook, the universalist vein in classics has become a subject for serious critical verification. The universalist strand has become a matter of serious doubt and fallacy. The fact that classics like Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary do have hidden gender-biased structure, though these texts like many classics have been read as universalist works that focus on the role of 'destiny in human life, darker side of life and inevitable tragedy in human life' etc.

The present paper attempts to go beyond this façade of interpretation and tries to establish that the classics in question have been already 'gendered. Hence the universalist readings that have been made all the while should be reviewed since they present only a facet of the complex doing that has gone into the making of the literary work. Against this backdrop, this paper attempts at 'gendering' what has been 'un-gendered' or read in that way.

This gesture inevitably proves the essentially incomplete nature of a literary work, and the consequent reduction/demotion a literary text undergoes in its status as a 'text' susceptible to further exploration and interpretation. At this stage, it is imperative for us to see what is meant by humanist and universalist interpretation that has been routinely given by critics while reading the literary works

A humanist criticism aims at focusing on the concepts of morals, values human predicament, role of fate, suffering of individuals. The universalist criticism attempts at generalising the humanist interpretation and tries to 'endorse the views of the writer of a literary work as eternal truths, common and natural. But the advent of structural criticism has helped to rise objective reading of 'classics' and remove the blinkers that perpetuated humanist criticism. "...recent structuralist and post-structuralist philosophical and critical theory, are expressly anti-humanistic, not only in the sense that they undertake to subvert many of the values proposed by traditional humanism, but in the more radical sense they undertake to decenter." or to eliminate entirely, the focus on the human being, or "subject" as the major object of study and the major agency in effecting scientific, cultural, and literary achievements. "Man." as Michel Foucault has put in a widely quoted affirmation, "is a simple fold in our language" who is destined to "disappear as soon as that knowledge has found a new form." In the realm of literary and critical theory, structuralists conceive of a human author as simply a "space" in which linguistic and cultural codes come together to effect a text... (Abrams:84)

The "gendering of the un-gendered" of this paper takes off from this point. The fact that a writer is product of his/times times



engenders the possibility of a biased/influenced portrayal of characters and situations of a literary work. In fact, this situation should motivate us to question "truth-value" and un-biased nature of the messages of the literary texts: "...text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original. blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture." (Barthes: 170)

This backdrop should help us to attempt at 'gendering' the so-called un-gendered works like Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary, and thereby unveil the hidden essentially androcentric views of the text. A humanist and universalist critical approach 'sums up the predicament of the protagonist of Anna Karenina in a near-dispassionate voice: "... a married woman's passion for young officer and her tragic fate."(Oxford Companion to English Literature: 987) In a similar vein, the text may be viewed is a triangle love affair. involving wife, husband and a third person (the lover of the wife)-- Anna-Karenin-Vronsky. But a more sensitive view brings into focus a higher issue, "Anna as a Rebel and Seeker": "crux of the novel lies in the heart-rending agony of Anna which is the outcome of her yearning for love and compassion."(Prasad: 269)

The problem with this text is Tolstoy's divided stance-as a proto-feminist and status quoist. The proto-feminist longings of Tolstoy indeed are evidenced through his portrayal of Anna's yearning, stated in an uninhibited way, for love and compassion which is conspicuous by its absence in her married life. Tolstoy's divided loyalty between the proto-feminism and the statusquoism is further

evidenced through the web of the plot that he has created in the manner of juxtaposition of three couples in the novel, Anna Karenin, Dolly and Oblonsky and Kitty and Levin. It is indeed this juxtaposition that betrays the 'divided stance'

Of these couples, it is Kitty and Levin, in spite of the initial not-so-excited relationship between them that end up as a successful couple through their cultivated' complementary relationship over the years. It is obvious that in the novel, they are favoured over Anna and Karenin and Dolly and Oblonsky couples. Stating this doesn't mean to belittle the master writer's attempt at presentation of wholesome view of life-showing women and men of compromising and uncompromising natures. But the surprising element is the harsh fate that has been meted out to Anna by her mentor and creator.

Perhaps, in the matters of narration it is the end that justifies the means, the middle and the beginning. The end of the novel-the committing of suicide on the part of Anna-does bring out the essentially gendered nature of the text and the ultimate prevalence of the binary opposition of "Man over Woman" that constitutes the text in question.

Narrative designs, in a pre-determined way, routinely get into the making of a literary text at times unconsciously since a writer is product of his/her times. The 'prevailing' blue prints of narrative, in spite of the author's well-intentioned motives in the making of a text, find their way into the text under construction and clinch the matter in a decisive way. Hence, uncovering the hidden narrative syntax that have constituted the structure of the text is crucial to realise how gendering



must have taken place in the skeleton of a work itself. The following 'hypothetical narrative syntax of Anna Karenina, the major part of the narrative design, can be considered as the backdrop of the text. A

close study of this narrative design informs us about the 'pre-determined that determined the progress and the ending of the text.

### 1. "Hypothetical Narrative Syntax of Anna Karenina with reference to the central characters Anna-Karenin-Vronsky.

Karenin (Husband Character) Anna(Wife Character) Vronsky (Lover) Society/Culture

| X                                                                                     | Y | L                                                                                                                                                                      | Z |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|
| Step1 X ignores Y.                                                                    |   | Y from home                                                                                                                                                            |   |
| Step2. Y feels bad about X but bears with the situation.                              |   | Step7 Z. fails to sustain his relationship with Y. (Fearing that Y is overpowering)                                                                                    |   |
| Step3 X continues to ignore and be un-compassionate towards Y                         |   | Step8.Y feels cheated and commits suicide. (Only possible exit)                                                                                                        |   |
| Step4 Y and 2 happen to meet and fall in love                                         |   | Z views Y's action as adultery, and hence considers the end met with by Y as natural. But do not have words to say anything about X or 1. and maintains tacit silence. |   |
| Step5. X perceives the original desire and the consequent 'change' in Y as 'immoral'. |   |                                                                                                                                                                        |   |

Step 6. X cannot' tolerate and throws out

### II. Hypothetical narrative syntax of Anna Karenina with reference to another important couple of the novel:

| Dolly (Wife)<br>X                                                                   | Oblonsky (Husband)<br>Y | Society/Culture/Morality<br>Z*                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Step1. X violates marriage agreement with Y by committing adultery.                 |                         | then onwards                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Step2. Y (cannot throw X from home) and hence sulks and leaves X's home (She has no |                         | *Society doesn't condemn X for adultery, and hence considers X and Y 'coming together as natural.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| home of her own)                                                                    |                         | As has been stated above, it is the 'end' that should justify the beginning and the middle of the narrative of a novel literary text. Notwithstanding the empathetic and profound detailing of Anna's character and 'liberty' given to the character to pursue the ends that she desired to pursue, the fate that is meted out to her stands out and betrays the un-stated and the understated. |
| Step3. X repents.                                                                   |                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Step4. Y has to forgive X.                                                          |                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Step5. Y rejoins X                                                                  |                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Step 6, X and Y live together forever from                                          |                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |



The un-stated and the understated can speak volumes about the 'hidden' face of the texts. Notwithstanding the proto-feminist leanings shown by Tolstoy, the 'structure of the text of Anna Karenina is held together by the centre called 'bourgeois culture. The identified centre privileges male over female as has been shown through the fates meted out to various male and female characters. The 'poetic justice', has been delivered by the writer and by the overpowering culture that worked through the writer, clearly betrays the forces that are at work in making the text. An ironic twist in the deliverance of 'justice' in this situation is the 'man-culprits' caught in the same in folly are let off whereas the 'woman-culprit is, as a rule, punished.

A similar hypothetical narrative syntax can be visualised by us in Madame Bovary. Flaubert indeed, like Tolstoy, does make a very sympathetic delineation of the saga

**The "Hypothetical Narrative Syntax in Madame Bovary with reference to main characters: Charles Bovary-Emma Bovary-Leon-Rodolph.**

Charles Bovary (Husband) X  
Emma Bovary(Wife) Y

Step1 An elderly X fails to live up to the young and romantic expectations of Y

Step2 Y attempts to put up with X's unpassionate and unromantic attitude to life

Step3Y meets her match in Lt and falls in live outside marriage

Step4Ll fails to sustain his interest in Y and leaves her in the lurch

Step5Y meets 1.2 and believes him as her match

Step612 exploits the romantic zeal of Y to live her life and at the end ditches her

of Emma Bovary in pursuit of love and compassion. But as has been detailed in the analysis of Anna Karenina, it is the 'end' that should betray us the suffocating hold of the gendered mindset on Flaubert. The clinching of the whole matter is done through the suicide of Emma Bovary. Being a married woman, notwithstanding the legitimate reasons for her liaisons, Emma Bovary has to pay a very heavy price with her life for her transgression whereas her male lovers are let off with any price to pay.

The following hypothetical narrative syntax of Madame Bovary makes a case for close comparison and similarity between Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary and thereby reinforces how the narrative is structured in a near uniform way. Following this lead, we can identify how both the writers, notwithstanding their proto-feminist concerns, can not help giving the "end" expected of the times.

Leon (Lover) L1  
Rodolphe (Lover) L2

Step7Y 'finds' no way out from the situation and fearing disgrace "commits suicide

Step81.1 and 12 do not experience any 'disgrace' and go unpunished (by the writer)

While duly acknowledging the significance of the realistic vein which perhaps influenced the poetic justice-Anna and Emma Bovary's suicide it is not difficult for the reader to discern the deep rooted influence of the literary structure actually clinched the matter. The 'transgression of Anna, the compromise of Dolly and the conformity of Kitty do exemplify the hidden



gendered structure of the text. The planks of transgression. compromise and conformity held by Anna and Emma, and Dolly and Kitty respectively do unveil the hidden gendered face of the writer. The In *Anna Karenina*:

following table further elaborates the gendered face of the texts by pointing out the gendered implications of the fate meted out to various characters:

| Character/Text   | Exhibited Stance (towards marriage) | Gendered Implication                                          |
|------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Anna             | Transgression                       | Failure of Marriage-Doomed to die.                            |
| Karenin          | Indifference                        | 'Normal'                                                      |
| Vronsky          | Adulterous Relationship             | Can survive social derision and hence not doomed to die.      |
| In Madame Bovary |                                     |                                                               |
| Emma Bovary      | Transgression                       | Failure of Marriage--Doomed to die                            |
| Charles Bovary   | Uncompassionate/Indifferent         | Normal Behaviour                                              |
| Leon             | Adulterous Relationship             | Can survive social derision and hence not doomed to die Ditto |
| Rodolphe         | Ditto                               | Ditto                                                         |

Anna and Emma's transgressions are tragic, and in fact they are 'destined to be tragic. But the problem is the 'end' meted out to the protagonists has been shown as 'universal' and natural. The writer of the paper, first of all, contend that with all due respect for Tolstoy and Flaubert's concern for woman and their 'proto-feminist concerns, yielded to the cultural pressure of their times. Secondly, as has been hinted at above, the juxtaposition of two more couples, one of survival marriage and another "successful" marriage in the case of Anna Karenina, and the total

letting off male counter parts of the doomed woman protagonists do vindicate narrative strategies and preferences of the writer.

The narratives of Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary do employ the narrative devices like third person point of view with a view to giving a neutral point of view. Similarly the narrative focalisation' in both the texts is on woman protagonists. But it is the "Voice" that makes us hears the overall controlling voice authority of the



two texts in question The paper writer contends that it is the 'narrative voice' that has gendered the fate of the protagonists though in a subtle and hidden way.

The advent of Feminist literature has initiated 'affirmative action' in literary writing through positively gendering literary texts. As has been pointed out elsewhere in this paper, feminist writers are paying back in the same currency-exploiting the narrative devices to the cause of Woman. Here are a few narrative devices that are thoroughly exploited by women writers of all hues belonging to all realms of literature-be they first world or third world.

- Using female characters as both reflectors and narrators (female point of view')
- Controlling through ' gynocentric 'voice
- Making texts open-ended
- Employing complex and subversive narrative structure
- Being deflationary towards men characters and inflationary towards women protagonists
- Choosing choice metaphors, texture of sentences and patterns of exposition

Using female characters both as reflectors and narrators has helped many women writers to narrate from female 'point of view' and to see from their perspective. In fact this has facilitated many a woman writer to be free from the so-called objective and neutral way of speaking out. In addition to this, this narrative device has shifted women characters from

margin to centre, and thereby ensured the readers' sympathy for them.

The crucial narrative device, like, 'gynocentric voice' has once and for all clinched the matter of positively and definitively gendering literary texts. Since 'narrative voice' has the ambience of remotely controlling the whole structure of a text, this device has been efficiently exploited to make the 'voice' of women heard. The underlying but heard voice helps a reader to discern hidden from the seen. In fact, 'voice' is the ultimate source of subversion that has been much exploited by women writers.

Open-ended writing is another characteristic attempt to gender texts on the part of many a woman writer. It is believed that this device reflects an essential female feature of keeping a matter for reconsiderations and reconciliation unlike making a patriarchal sealing off. Employing complex and subversive narrative is another device that has been used by women writers to make their point in a striking manner. By giving the narrative improbable twists and turns and thereby coming up with bizarre situations, at times, making volte face, women writers have been attempting at subversion of the established.

Since a writer is the creator, s/he has enough potential either to make or mar a character Many a woman writer, in the cause of gender, has begun to use inflationary and deflationary techniques either to glorify their female characters or to marginalize their male characters. Yet another major literary device is women writers' attempt creating their own language from the patriarchal metaphors, texture of sentences and expositions. By being imaginative in the first hand the women writers have been able to get rid of the borrowed literary expression.

Mastering the onetime master's devices



but freed the master's "looking glass" perspective, most of the women writers have begun writing-writing from their own perspective and for a cause. Their writings shall indeed be considered as 'affirmative action' in the cause of gender-a positive, deliberate, decisive voicing of the unheard.

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