

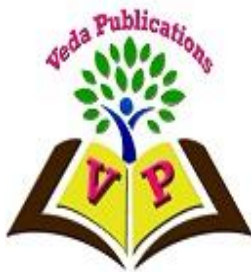


CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF THE SOCIAL POSITION OF WOMEN AS DEPICTED IN *THE CANTERBURY TALES* BY GEOFFREY CHAUCER

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ABSTRACT

In the recent times when large of part of thinking, writing and efforts are made to change the condition of women and also to present the true picture of their position in the society, Geoffrey Chaucer in the Middle Ages (1392) wrote *The Canterbury Tales*. He depicted women belonging to different groups and positions and in different conditions but all of them were suffering under the male dominated society. Due to the lack of education and authority, women's role has always been confined to the four walls of the house and their rationality, independence and loyalty is questioned. Although the women have been fighting a long battle for freedom, yet their position has still not changed. This paper is an endeavour to put forward the relevance of *The Canterbury Tales* which was written in 1392 but has truly depicted the unchanged position of women even now. This paper presents that the work of Chaucer was ahead of its time and women's struggle to come out of the shackles of patriarchy is still not achieved.

Keywords: *Contemporary Relevance, Subordination, Social position, Women position, Women Struggle.*

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As the saying goes “the apple does not fall far from the tree”, there is not much of a difference between the conditions of women back in the Middle Ages with that of today. The only difference lies in the political and social rights which are given to them in the contemporary world. But back then, they were under the reign of the male authority subduing their existence. There are several reasons which could be interpreted to pronounce that their “inferior” image was only a construction by the patriarchal society instead of human rationale. In the middle age, Biblical and Morality texts were written all around Europe. Some French and Latin texts were also translated in *Middle English* so that it could reach a wider audience. In this context, the story of Adam and Eve was the most significant as it aimed to establish the moral inferiority of womankind. People were taught that the first woman, Eve, committed the “original sin” which resulted in the downfall of mankind. As written in the Genesis 3:16, God says to Eve “Your desire will be for your husband, /and he will rule over you”. This clearly states that man rules over the woman and she is seen as an inferior sex of less importance and irrational thoughts. Stories of Virgin Mary and Katherine Group were written so that women could be held under the repressive idea of chastity and institution of marriage. The church and the aristocrats ensure that everybody oblige to their respective positions.

Apart from the religious and biblical texts, in the Middle Age, the notion of courtly love grew popular, replacing the existing conventional idea of love. Courtly love is a love of servitude, in which a man of lower rank falls in love with a woman of higher rank even if she does not return the favour. This idea emerged because of the feudalism in the Middle Age Europe and hence, questioned the loyalty and dignity of a woman in society. However, Christianity and its institution of Church also contributed towards this construction of a patriarchal society. Through their teachings and ideas, they propagated the subservient state of women in society. Religion used literature as the central device to spread such ideas among people. For example, the writings of Saint Paul the Apostle emphasized men's authority over women, forbidding women from

teaching, and instructing them to remain silent. On the other hand, marriage is the most common institution through which women are subjected to the authority of men. This institution emphasizes the servitude of a woman towards her husband which resulted in unequal relationship between the two.

Moreover, there is not a much-documented history of women becoming queens or rulers of the kingdoms, but there is still an evidence of one of the most remarkable example of Queen Isabella (1295–1358), who brought end of the reign for her husband (Edward II) with her lover. It should be noted that, although she ruled the kingdom as a queen, her rule was not independent as a woman. She needed a man beside her, as a king, so that the society could accept her as a ruler. Women could wield political power in middle age, especially as queens and regents, but they were only allowed to exercise royal authority on behalf of their absent husbands or underage sons. They simply could not acquire political power independently and this shows their plight as an unequal in the Middle Age European society.

Furthermore, Women were not supposed to be financially independent until the beginning of the industrial revolution which had swayed entire Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. In middle age too, women were only subjected and restricted to domestic spaces. Either they were wives at home or nuns in the church. Women also used to be peasants but that could not be considered as an independent vocation. Feminists of that time believed that until women become financially independent, they can never remove their unequal status in a patriarchal society as financial dependency on their husbands and fathers is the root cause of their plight. In the fourteenth century, the society was based on the stereotypical norms, where man was seen as brave, heroic, runner of society and home whereas woman was always seen as submissive, passive, and chaste. However, even though the society started moving towards advancement in the social, economic and political sphere, the lives of women remained unchanged. Similarly, Aristotle says in his work *Politics* (1254b13–14), "as regards the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior,



the male ruler and the female subject". This view of women being a subject is further highlighted by Scholar Eileen Power comments:

In considering the characteristic medieval ideas about woman, it is important to know not only what the ideas themselves were but also what the sources from which they spring. The expressed opinion of any age depends on the persons and the classes who happen to articulate it; and for this reason alone it often represents the views of a small but vocal minority. In the early middle Ages, what passed for contemporary opinion came from two sources – the Church and the aristocracy. (9)

These thoughts were accepted by the church and the clergy. The woman was considered lower in status than the man and this also led to her exclusion from all the authoritative parts of the society. Different roles were attributed to the women in the society; she has to fulfill the role of being a mother, wife and Daughter and hence, had to prove her loyalty at every step. Furthermore, several 'names' and 'roles' were granted to her such as 'whore', 'Witch', 'Virgin' and 'Mother' and they were seen in this light. However, a woman not only suffered inside the house, but had to conform to the rules of the society set by the dominant patriarchal forces. The position of women from these times to the modern age has not altered and this was presented by Geoffrey Chaucer in his canonical work *The Canterbury Tales*. He is popularly known as 'The Father of English Literature' and was born around 1340's and died around 1400's. Chaucer lived and wrote in the world when the shadows of the middle age were only beginning to scatter before the clear dawn of modern culture. Whatever he has delineated in his writings brought out the customs of his age and people and he was the one who was ahead of his time which became clear when his successors turned back to him for the inspiration. Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* in 1392 which was the most celebrated work of the time. It is about the journey to a pilgrimage (Tabard Inn in Southwark, London) in which a group of different men and women

participated. On the way each pilgrim was asked to narrate a story and thus, 24 stories were narrated by each pilgrim: a knight, a miller, a reeve, a cook, a man of law, a married woman from Bath, a friar, a summoner, a clerk, a merchant, a squire, a Franklin, a physician, a pardoner, a shipman, a prioress, Chaucer himself, a monk, a nun's priest, a second nun, a canon's yeoman, a manciple and a parson.

Since, the pilgrim's belonged to different strata of society hence; their stories raised several issues and themes. The women in the tales can be differentiated and segregated according to the characters they portray either as the narrator or as they appeared in the narration of other pilgrims.

In the first group, woman has to prove her virtue and had to remain true to her husband in every circumstance. This is represented through *The Clerk's Tale* where the main character Griselda, a poor girl from a village is chosen by a man, Walter as his future wife. But the man always doubted her love and loyalty towards him. To test her, he pretended to kill her children and marry another woman. But Griselda didn't spoke against him neither she defended herself. She remained silent in all the circumstances proving her obedience and loyalty. Ultimately Walter accepted his deceit and they started living happily with their children. This is a very common picture of a women bounded in the patriarchal society where she had to conform to the ways of man without being left with any other option. In the contemporary times as well, women like Griselda had to obey and devote the life to their husband.

The other tale narrated by Huberd the Friar portrays the Condition of Widows in *The Friar's Tale*. In this tale, a decent widow is accused of false allegations of adultery by a summoner to extort money. He wanted to get money out of her by deceit. Although at the end Summoner had to die, but this shows that the life of the widows and single women is very hard in the male dominated society where they are seen as weak targets. This condition has not improved in the present times as well as they still feel insecure, vulnerable and unsafe.

The molestation and harassment which women had to face is narrated through *The Tale of*



Melibeus in which the main female character Prudence, a wife of an aristocrat and her daughter were attacked by the enemies of the aristocrat. After the incident she decided not to take any action against the enemies which clearly shows the insecurity as well as fear which women had in their hearts whether they were of any class or status which is true in today's time as well. This tale presented a brutal image of society by Chaucer, which victimises the women to present their superiority. This tale clearly depicts the situation of the present days, where women belonging to any class and caste have to bear consequences in every situation.

The worst aspect of man's nature was narrated through *The Physician's Tale* in which Virginia a beautiful and decent girl became the target of the judge's attention and attraction. She was in return murdered by her own father who chopped off her head which was none less than the 'honour killing' done in the present time by the families to save their honour and respect. The murder of a girl child before her birth in the name of family 'clan' or the 'reputation' is still prevalent in the society.

The other vastly diverse problem faced by the women is that of 'loyalty' which was unfulfilled by their lovers or the husbands and was seen in *The Squire's Tale* where not a woman but a female bird Falcon narrated her depressed tale in which she was left behind by her lover who went away in the world with a promise of returning, which was not fulfilled by him. The unrequited love and promises made by the man has always left the women stranded. On the other hand a contrasting story which Chaucer narrated about 'loyalty' is in *The Franklin's Tale* which was about the equal relationship between man and women portrayed through Dorigen and Arveragus. Although, outside the house, Arveragus is the master but Dorigen loved her husband deeply and wholeheartedly that she asked her suitor to set her free and independent. After listening to her demands he sets her off and this shows that there are still some people in the society who respect women and their sentiments. This tale is an appropriate example of conscience, gentleness and patience. The tale narrates that there are some people who value emotions and sentiments.

Contrastingly, another group which was portrayed in *The Canterbury Tales* is the religious group represented through *The Second Nun's Tale* and *The Man of Law's Tale*. In *The Man of Law's Tale* the woman Constance suffers all her life due to her religion and beauty while in *The Second Nun's Tale*, Cecilia was honoured for her bravery and moral character. Her unwavering faith and devotion in God transformed her into Saint Cecilia. Both are opposing characters based on the religious backdrop that depicts the role of religion and faith which curbs the life of people. On the other hand, an extremely vibrant and the most significant character is of the Wife of Bath in the same tale. She narrated her story in the *Prologue* which shows that she fought all the structures and institutions made by the man. She was seen as a greedy woman who married old man for their wealth but she was the most courageous and emancipated woman in *The Canterbury Tales*. She has profound knowledge of Bible and justifies her behaviour and sets a ground for other women who want to be independent and equal to their male counterpart in behaviour and thinking. Although she is seen as obscene, and was given multiple names but she stood her ground and fought against the patriarchal society. The traditional criticism based on religion was shown through *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. The vigour and valour that she displayed in her actions against the male authority sets her as an example for the women for centuries to come. The tales narrated by the pilgrims hold a central message about the position of women which was often ignored under the other themes associated with it. Chaucer though belonged to the middle age, his vision, stories and narration was beyond these times.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can say that the condition of women has not changed from the time of Chaucer till the present times. The patriarchal system of degrading women and curbing their freedom is shown by Chaucer. The characters such as Wife of Bath, Griselda, Constance and others can only raise doubts about their rights but cannot question the system. Women were considered hysterical if they raise their voices, oppose the authority, and try to set



themselves apart from the conventions. Their world was restricted and life was contained. Whereas the boundary of Chaucer's work was not restricted to the medieval times but has the undertone of feminism in the behaviour of the characters and challenges the authorities by laying down the true picture of the society. However, as the scenario has improved in the present age because of education, economic independence and other rights, still the women feel unsafe, insecure, and live in the fear of death, molestation, humiliation, unfaithful love and religious restriction as portrayed by Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales*.

Moving forward to our new world, despite all the grand changes one might think have happened since the middle age, we still find ourselves stuck in a world of inequality. There is a greater awareness among the female populace, yet a lot is left to be desired.

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