

Benevolent Sexism in Literature

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Abstract:

Literature showcases sexism – either a ‘mild’ one or a ‘rough or cruel’ one. The difference is that in the former, the male characters appear as ‘saviours’ of the female protagonists who are in need, and so one may not feel that sort of an act as sexism. In the latter case, the bias or differentiation is too much that the character appears to be literally cruel. The first one comes under the category of ‘benevolent’ sexism, where gender bias is not considered offensive; rather it is considered as an act of kindness from the male character who is just ‘helping’ the ‘damsel in distress’. This form of sexism is most common in literature of all ages, even in this modern era. Cinema, which is considered as one of the popular mediums of literature also makes use of this element. This study is an attempt to bring out instances of benevolent sexism that is evident in literary works, in order to make the concept more familiar.

Keywords: gender bias, benevolent sexism, female independence.

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‘Benevolent Sexism’ is a term coined by social psychologists Peter Glick and Susan Fiske in their theory on “Ambivalent Sexism”. According to this theory, there are two forms of sexism – hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. While the former explicitly shows anarchy and violence against women, the latter cherishes women as someone that should be cared, loved, protected and pampered; but the fact is that this form of caring is another form of controlling, curbing the independence of women, where love becomes a ‘golden cage’. This form of sexism appears gentle on the surface, but its impact in maintaining gender inequality is much higher. It’s actually a ‘sugar-coated’ version of gender bias. This study is an attempt to bring out the elements of benevolent sexism that is explicit in many works of Literature.

Through centuries, literature heralds women as selfless and emotionally nurturing. At a glance one might feel that the women characters are respected by idealising them, but the fact is that they are reduced to certain stereotypical characters rather than one with superior thought process. Literature shows how ‘gentle’ men involve in praising the women for having qualities like gentleness, self-sacrifice, silent sufferings, etc. Like a true ‘angel in the house’, the female characters are supposed to play house and nurture the members and is not expected to have any individuality; her duty is solely to appease her husband and his family and she will be known to the outer world only through her relationship to them rather than having a personality of her own.

A classic example is Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* in which the eldest daughter of the Bennetts’ is considered to be virtuous and a perfect model for all the other female characters. The second daughter, though the protagonist of this novel, is not praised for her quick-wittedness or intelligent responses, but rather criticised for not being ‘feminine’. Similarly, Elinor in the novel *Sense and Sensibility* is an embodiment of ‘sense’ but is ostracised by many for not being gentle and sensible like her sister, Marianne. Though Jane Austen is considered to have created many progressive women characters, it also reflects the gender norms of its time.

Another example is the novel *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. This novel again revolves around the lives of four sisters and the character Beth March is pictured as an epitome of benevolent sexism. She is the living image of the one who is selflessly dedicated to her family; family piety comes first before all her dreams and ambitions. The illness and death of Beth in the novel makes her a very loving character, who confines to domesticity and self-sacrifice, as is expected from a lady of the 18th century story. Unlike her sister Jo (Josephine) March, who is independent and eloquent, Beth is docile by nature and so is hailed throughout the novel. Her character is deeply loved, yet her lack of personal ambition and agency reinforces the idea that women’s highest value lies in sacrifice and service. There are many independent characters like her sister Jo, but the characters of Beth and Amy are considered to align with the traditional roles of ‘ideal’ women.

The idea of benevolent sexism can be found in literary works of other languages also. Often women characters are portrayed as the epitome of silent suffering, selfless love, silent support, gentleness, etc. that one may feel that a woman without these characteristics is not a ‘woman’ at all. The over praising of women

characters who are virtuous, loyal, gentle, soft-spoken, etc. is in a way an indirect restriction imposed on women, making them believe that these qualities are meant for them alone. This curbs the women from following their likes and achieving their ambitions, even when they are free-spirited. To achieve this goal, the women characters are portrayed as ‘damsels in distress’, who are powerless by themselves and need care and protection. Even when the female characters are strong, their strength is often framed in relation to male approval or protection; since men are considered to be the sole providers.

This sort of stereotyping is common in romantic literatures, where the bossy men praises women who are gentle, caring, loving and virtuous. This is another form of exerting control on these women by stereotyping them as ideal women. The controlling or bossy nature of the lover is considered to be romantic, but in reality, it is another form of sexism in action; curtailing the freedom of women in the name of love, adoration, respect for her filial piety, etc. Here again, the women are devoid of any independence and ambitions in life, thus highlighting the normalization of this sort of gender inequality.

Modern literature, despite its increased focus on gender equality, is not free from benevolent sexism. Contemporary works may present strong female characters, but they often continue to emphasize traditionally feminine qualities. For example, in modern scenario, a woman is supposed to engage in dual roles; i.e., as both a homemaker and a working woman. She is supposed to complete all these roles perfectly, the caring, loving, daughter or daughter-in-law, wife, mother, and is also expected to perform well in her career.

Through literature, the socio-cultural aspects of different areas are also brought into light. For example, in the novel, *Like Water for Chocolate*, Laura Esquivel highlights the Mexican tradition that insists the youngest daughter to remain unmarried and look after her birth-mother. The protagonists Tita and Pedro, who were in love, were not allowed to marry because Tita was the youngest in her family. Pedro was thus forced to marry Rossaura, Tita’s elder sister. Here benevolent sexism comes into play; Pedro marries and consummates his marriage with Rossaura, saying that was his duty, but he never allowed Tita to have any close contact with any male figures. Pedro remains the ‘protector’ of the ranch as well as Tita. His obsession towards Rita drives Mama Elena angry and forces them out of the house. Still, he claims to have ‘true’ feelings only for Tita and controls her relationships. One might feel that Pedro is doing all this out of true concern for Tita’s well-being, but in reality, he is exploiting the ‘shackles’ that Mama Elena has imposed on her daughter in the name of love.

Though certain characters like Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*, Eliza Doolittle of the play, *Pygmalion*, etc. challenge the conventional ‘benevolent sexism’, majority ‘stood up’ for benevolent sexism. Many authors deliberately created such characters in order to question the act of benevolence; but ultimately, even these characters had to submit themselves to social criticism and thus ‘benevolent’ categorization or discrimination. Though many characters have evolved as women with independent thought, action and courage; even they are portrayed as someone who is backed by a man for her development. Readers may find it difficult to decide if this sort of ‘helping’ can be called sexism or not.

People became more and more aware about the notions of gender bias in literature, through critical thinking, active participation in discussions relating to the topic, etc. which reveals the fact that education helps for the increased awareness among the students, which in turn affects the whole mass. But, as said before, benevolent sexism in literature is a complex and pervasive phenomenon. It operates through the idealization of women, reinforcing traditional roles and limiting their agency. While it appears positive, it ultimately sustains gender inequality by confining women within narrow expectations.

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