

## ROLE OF PROSTITUTION IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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*The present paper aims at critically analyzing the role and place of prostitution in English literary texts with special focus on her miseries and troubles caused by the ill-treatment meted out to her for being involved in immoral and illegitimate profession for livelihood. Prostitution has been a very sensitive and controversial issue in the history of mankind with its flinching and dubious status in the society across the world since the primitive era. In most of the countries, it is not considered to be a decent and moral act declaring it as an illegitimate activity or profession. However, there has been a drastic change in the attitude of people towards prostitution over time acknowledging the need and relevance of it by bestowing legal shield to it. A story of the life of a sex worker is replete with woes and worries despite her satiating the uncontrollable carnal thirst of those who are helpless and compelled to find a source of satisfaction in this regard. English literature has addressed to this significant aspect of human world with deep concern and care in some eminent literary texts.*

**Key Words:** Prostitution, gender, morality, sexuality, patriarchal structure, social framework

### Introduction :

The role of prostitution in English literature has long served as a multifarious lens through which to examine social values, personal morality, and gender dynamics. Often depicted as a source of scandal and a means of survival, the concept of the prostitute has evolved remarkably over literary history, reflecting changing views on sexuality, class, and agency. From the notorious courtesans of the Renaissance to the marginalized figures found in Victorian novels, these characters often embody struggles against patriarchal structures, as is evident from contemporary analyses of the glamorization of such characters, such as in works that consider the effects of films such as *Moulin Rouge*. (Buck- Morse et al.) In addition, a broader cultural critiques emerges when considering how literature addresses issues related to exploitation and social indifference, highlighting the troubling realities underlying these depictions in contexts such as major sporting events (Brackenridge et al.). Thus, the various representations of prostitution invite deeper inquiry into the moral complexities of human existence.

### A review of prostitution as a recurring topic in English literature :

From Chaucer's illegally attractive characters From "The Canterbury Tales" to the tragic figures in the works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's, literature often reflects the moral dilemmas surrounding sex work. These depictions not only reveal societal attitudes toward women but also critique the hypocrisy embedded in cultural frameworks. Furthermore, as scholars have noted, the role of sex workers is increasingly recognized in public health discussions, particularly regarding the spread of HIV, underscoring the precarious position of

these individuals in society. Research shows that female sex workers are considered a key group in the spread of HIV, while male sex workers are significantly marginalized in the discussion, suggesting the need for broader representation in literary frameworks (Fletcher et. Al.) Thus, the recurring theme of prostitution serves as a perspective for examining social issues and human relationships in depth.

### **Historical context :**

Throughout English literature, the historical context of prostitution reflects evolving perceptions and social attitudes towards women and sexuality. For example, during the Victorian period, prostitution was widespread and often glamorized, as seen in various literary works that portray prostitutes as both objects of desire and tragic figures bound by social norms. This complexity is echoed in contemporary analyses, such as how the image of the prostitute has been glamorized in modern adaptations, particularly in works such as Baz. Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge*, which shows the glamour and professionalism associated with such characters (Buck- Morse et al.) This historical background not only highlights the contradictions inherent in the depiction of female sexuality but also critiques the patriarchal structures that underpin these representations, recalling the issues of child abuse discussed by institutions that address such social vulnerabilities (Brackenridge et al.) Thus, literary depictions of prostitution serve as a lens through which broader cultural values and economic realities can be examined.

### **Portrayal of prostitution and its social consequences in Victorian literature :**

In Victorian literature, prostitution is a poignant approach through which social norms and gender dynamics are examined, highlighting the precarious position of women in patriarchal society. Authors such as Thomas Hardy portray female characters such as Tess Derbyfield and Lucetta to expose the moral hypocrisy surrounding sexual morality. Tess's character, who represents both innocence and victimhood, challenges social norms through her openness about her sexual past, sharply contrasting with Lucetta's more traditional approach of hiding for self-protection, which ultimately has disastrous consequences for both women (Baudry et al.). This portrayal highlights the punitive nature of Victorian society towards women who cross established boundaries. Further exploration of the narratives surrounding female characters reveals how these literary works reflect deep-seated social concerns about women's autonomy and roles, as seen in the critique of traditional femininity that emerges in the writings of both Woolf and Rice ( Nordstrand L et al.). Such representations highlight the complex interplay between social class, gender expectations, and notions of morality, which in turn illuminates the important role of prostitution in understanding the cultural fabric of the period.

### **Character analysis :**

In English literature, characters who play the role of prostitutes often serve as complex reflections of social values and concerns. These characters frequently navigate the tension between economic necessity and moral judgment, demonstrating the multifaceted relationship between gender and class. Late Victorian reforms, particularly the Criminal Law Reform Act of 1885, are crucial to understanding this dynamic, as they not only heightened social concerns about child prostitution but also reinforced class boundaries, positioning working-class girls as in need of protection while simultaneously undermining their agency (Lamasniemi et al.) Moreover, modern representations exemplified by the image of the courtesan in works such as

Baz. Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge* displays the allure and glamour associated with prostitution, which conceals a deeper critique of capitalism and patriarchy (Buck- Morse et al.) Thus, character analysis in this context reveals the complex interplay of social structure, individual agency, and narrative function in depicting the role of prostitution throughout English literature.

The exploration of prominent literary figures who represent prostitution sheds significant light on complex socio-political narratives in English literature. Authors such as J.J. Grandville and Jane Austen work on themes of gender and sexuality, shaping readers' perceptions of female agency and social constraints. Grandville's *Scenes de la vie privée et public des animaux* offers a satirical commentary on women's roles during the July Monarchy, suggesting that women's associations with sensuality and consumerism disempower them in literary spaces, a notion reinforced by the animal metaphors she uses (Sport et al.). In contrast, Austen's work depicts the precariousness of lovemaking, integrating contemporary social debates about women's place within patriarchal structures. By referencing illicit behaviors, Austen critiques the toxic dynamics that place women in vulnerable positions, underscoring their dependency within a hostile social framework (Green J.). The stories crafted by these characters ultimately reveal and interrogate the multifaceted dimensions of prostitution and its implications within broader literary theory.

### **Conclusion :**

Finally, the exploration of prostitution in English literature reveals multifaceted and often controversial depictions of gender, power, and social norms. An analysis of key texts suggests that prostitution serves not only as a narrative device but also as a critical lens through which to examine issues of social injustice and moral ambiguity. Portrayals of prostitutes often reflect deep-seated social concerns about women's autonomy and economic dependence, highlighting the intersection of class and gender inequality. Furthermore, the literature addresses the complexities of consent and exploitation, echoing contemporary conversations around human trafficking and systemic oppression. This discourse is linked to broader social issues, as seen in studies addressing sexual exploitation, calling for a reassessment of protective measures in the cultural sphere (Brackenridge et al.). The portrayal of prostitution in English literature has undergone significant change, reflecting broader societal views on women, morality, and class. Initially portrayed in a reductive, often derogatory light, characters symbolizing prostitution served as scapegoats for social ills, reinforcing patriarchal paradigms. However, contemporary interpretations have attempted to bring nuance and depth, allowing individuals to identify the socio-economic factors that force individuals into such roles. This change is reflected in works such as Deepa. Mehta's film 'Water' critiques traditional values and exposes the oppressive social structures that shape women's lives, demonstrating that the struggle against degrading practices is an ongoing one (Somacarrera-Inigo et al.) Furthermore, while modern narratives increasingly emphasize agency and autonomy in the context of prostitution, they challenge the stigma associated with sex work and advocate for a more compassionate understanding of its reality. This evolution not only highlights the enduring relevance of prostitution in literature but also serves as a catalyst for contemporary discourse on women's rights and social justice (Marconi R.).

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