

# The Infantilization of Women through Literature

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## Abstract

*Women get pressurized by society throughout their lives, and it has been the reality for most of our existence. The pressure of the same has been rather daunting and has many forms of exploitation. "Infantilization," among the various forms of exploitation is the most common, formed by aeons of oppression and subjugation of women by men. "Infantilization" is defined as a process in which women are expected and treated like defenseless children. This issue of infantilization is still present and normalised in modern societies where young girls are expected to behave like adults and adult women, on the other hand, are infantilised. It is an issue which needs to be discussed, especially in an era where the position of women only continues to deteriorate even further. Literature, also known as the mirror of society, reflects the culture and social system of a time period. It helps us to also understand how patriarchy evolved and came to being and how it affected women's life and their perceptions even today. This paper aims to shed light on the portrayal of women and their traditional gender roles, which may include being passive, nurturing, and dependent, characteristics associated with femininity are denoted with infancy. If anything, such varied roles that are expected of women are a mirror to the blatant hypocrisy and prevalent patriarchal regime. Religion and other cultural components like myths and legends form the base in which the "infantilization" finds its roots. This paper will attempt to problematize these roles/ expectations that are sought from women, in the process bringing about the rampant sexism that exists in contemporary society.*

**Keywords:** *patriarchy, infantilization, women, subjugation, feminism.*

## Introduction

For ages, women are conditioned to prioritize what carters 'male gaze'. Their behavior, physical appearance, their self-perception, has been defined, redefined, re-phrased and reconstructed again and again to appeal to the male preference. Which, Overtime, caused women to be seen as dependent, vulnerable and always in need to be coddled like a child. Infantilization of women became more apparent and problematic as time passed. It has been used and still being used as a tool to oppress and limit women to assigned gender roles.

Infantilization is the prolonged treatment of someone who is not a child, primarily by using demeaning practices such as condescending language, limiting their decision-making abilities and denying them agency and autonomy. Infantilization of women is when, usually men, see adult women in the same light as children. It is a gendered

practice, linked with patriarchy, which puts men in authority by default and women as sub gender and dependent on men. This paper discusses the infantilization of women within the patriarchal society, through some well known literary works from different ages and also to highlight and understand the effect of the continuing legacy of the same.

## Materials and Methods

The ideology of infantilization of women is not new to the 21st century. Women's voice in ancient times was primarily ignored or silenced in literature, historical narratives, philosophical discourse, and political life. Ancient Greek conferred young boys in the same status as adult women. Contrary to the general belief that homosexuality was socially accepted in ancient Greece. Intimacy between two adult men was deemed inappropriate. But what they socially approved was the act of 'pederasty', a sexual

activity involving a man and a young boy. Since Greek society saw young boys on the same level as grown women, they were fine with the idea of a sexual relationship between an adult man (as a dominant) and his partner (young boy as a submissive). The comparison of women with young boys was uprooted in the belief that women were weaker emotionally, physically and mentally and less developed. This demeaning view of women pervaded Western society throughout the upcoming centuries and contributed to the infantilization of women. Aristotle considered women to be weaker and more "malicious" by nature. Whereas Plato, who is also known as the first feminist and radically promoted equality of opportunity, frequently contradicted himself by making degrading remarks towards women.

"Wherefore women are more compassionate and more readily made to weep, more jealous and querulous, fonder of railing, and more contentious. The female also is more subject to depression of spirits and despair than the male. She is also more shameless and false, more readily deceived, and more mindful of injury, more watchful, more idle, and on the whole less excitable than the male. On the contrary, the male is more ready to help, and, as it has been said, braver than the female; and even in malaria, if the sepia is struck with a trident, the male comes to help the female, but the female makes her escape if the male is struck." (Aristotle, 1)

Myths are a vital part of one's life. Myths are stories based on tradition. Some may have factual origins, mostly fictional. But myths are more than mere stories. They are sacred tales that explain the world and man's experience. Myths are as relevant today as they were in the ancient times. Myths answer questions that are timeless and serve as a compass to each generation. They are used to teach lessons but have also been ill-used by some.

Through myth and institutionalization of cultural belief and practices religion created the foundation of subordination of women. Christianity reasoned the subordination with the myth of "sin" done by Eve, condemning all women to eternal punishment. They blamed Eve for humanity becoming sinners by birth. This was further encouraged by the Arthurian and medieval writers like Chaucer and his contemporaries who gave their female characters roles of mothers, wives, and peace

weavers, none other than that. It was necessary to be "pure" and "good" to be seen as a "gift to mankind." Otherwise, they were portrayed as evil beings like monsters, witches and whores.

Many pieces of literature regard femininity with purity. The notion that women must preserve their purity and youthfulness is still prevalent to this day. The character Ophelia from Hamlet (1603), by Shakespeare is an excellent example of this notion. Shakespeare used flowers to symbolize women's virginity and their worth. Her relationship was constantly controlled by Polonius and Laertes as if she was too young to make her own decision. They believed, if she continued to fall for Hamlet she would give her flower away and no man would want her after that. The motif of infantilization as flowers are a symbol of purity and innocence. When compared with Ophelia, it makes her seem like an infant. Men around her infantilized and objectified her and saw her as nothing above a pretty reproductive being.

Another concept that religion pushed forward is benevolent patriarchy (sometimes known as Complementarianism), Which is often presented as a type of gentle protection and relief of pressure for women. It claims that men are doing a sacrificial service for women by 'taking the lead' and making decisions for them. On the contrary, "benevolent" patriarchy is a form of infantilization. It slashes women to an infant or childlike state by insisting that they are in need of the more mature, "adult" authority of a man in their life. Where benevolent patriarchy is practiced, women are discouraged or are not trusted to be fully mature, independent adults. They are not given equal opportunity and agency to put weighted input in any relationship where a man is involved. Benevolent patriarchy provides a false sense of equity but not equality. The best example for this is the character of Ophelia. She was codependent on her father and brother, who were very restrictive of her behavior. After their death, Ophelia slipped into madness because she was alone and unable to properly function and make decisions for herself.

The theme of benevolent patriarchy and infantilization of women is portrayed well in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). "I sometimes fancy that in my condition, if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus..." ( Gilman, 5). The husband

treats the narrator with a little too much love. He uses pet names like little goose, baby and Darling and the tone of his language is sweet as if he is talking to a child. He too, like Ophelia's family, made all decisions for the narrator and caged her in the nursery. "The patriarchal control over the personal spaces of women is portrayed in The Yellow wallpaper in which the husband chooses her room for rest, and refuses her requests." (Ford, 309). Her husband controls her physical, personal space and her contact with the outside world, confining her to bedrest, despite her instincts and desires that tells her to seek out life beyond the nursery.

"The husband taking decisions for the narrator like a parent and the usage of nursery in The Yellow Wallpaper as the place of confinement is the motif of the infantilization of women in society." (MacPike, 287). She further explains, "The bars of the window in the nursery symbolises the narrator's imprisonment similar to the pattern on the wallpaper that constrains the woman in the wall. Her room represents her lack of personal space and authority in front of her husband." (MacPike, 288). The narrator's desires to be away from the wallpaper, to be out of the nursery, but her pleas are greeted with a cruel rejection and a reminder that she should obey him because he is more educated.

Gilman's short story highlights the oppression women go through in the domestic sphere and in the medical field. The narrator's mental state gets constantly neglected and her husband, a physician, undermines her condition and cages her to a nursery Eventually causing her to go insane. In the 19th, most of the time, all women's issues were blamed on them having a uterus. Gilman, with her semi-autobiographical work, wanted to throw light on the constant negligence and simplification of women's illness in the 19th century.

The 18th and 19th centuries owns the title of the 'golden age' for children 's literature. During that time, childhood was seen as the time of life where an individual's mind is like a 'white paper'. People realized the importance of the education and development of one's mind. The literature of this age was full of fantastic and moral elements uniquely designed for children. The works had plots which taught childrens a lesson at the end. The lessons were different for both genders. They taught young girls and boys different ways to conduct, and that's how the

writers imposed gender roles and behavior on children. The concept of purity, duty and obedience to the male authority was instilled in the early stage of life which made it easier for the young girls to their assigned traditional roles. Though in this era feminism was flourishing it was not given much importance. There were sermons and teaching books that were very popular that taught women to conduct themselves.

Women in Victorian society were seen as the symbol of sexual purity. They were expected to refrain from mentioning anything relating to sexuality and were expected to repress their sexualities. Victorians attested to the importance of domestic household affairs to women. This reasoned the belief that it was inappropriate for a woman to utter a word on anything sexual and even related to it. Women were expected to be so innocent that it ingrained the belief that they did not possess sexual desire. For instance, in *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life: Considered in Their Psychological, Social and Moral Relations* (1857) by William Acton, It is suggested that women feel no passions except domestic work and love for children. It even insinuated that the consummation of marriage brought pain and suffering to women. Diman summaries in accurate words by defining the "Ideal English wife": "she defines an ideal wife and mother to be kind, considerate, innocent and ignorant of anything sensual, and unconditionally in love with the man that she is willing to forget her own needs and wants" ( Dillman 129)

Infantilization of women is not only limited to the Western society. Patriarchy is a social structure followed by most societies in the world. The land of diversity, the Indian subcontinent, for instance, is also a patriarchal society. Though a little different because of the cultural differences, it has similar foundations of patriarchy of the West. Religions worldwide have sustained the tradition of control with the help of time. Overtime, it was used as a tool to amplify the inferiority of women. And just like Christianity helped in the formation of the stereotypes about women through myth and institutionalization of cultural beliefs. The Hindu scriptures that were written by the Aryans also overtook the already present goddess culture in the Indian subcontinent, creating the foundation

for patriarchy and the foundation for women's subordination today. To this day, though women are denoted with the names of goddesses but they are not treated as such. In most Hindu legends, women are not given much importance. The existing characters, for example, Draupadi, are celebrated for being confident and outspoken, but that's all they are not given autonomy to act outside of their expectations as a woman. They do not have much role to play other than a mother, wife, sister, and daughter. Similarly, other religions prevalent in the Indian subcontinent have similar views about women.

The infantilization of women has adverse effects on their psychology. Women who are sheltered their whole lives become dependent and vulnerable to making bad decisions. Most of these women are epitomized versions of Ophelia, and they end up like her if they are trapped in an abusive relationship, romantic or platonic with their male counterparts. Infantilization is also a form of emotional abuse. It forces women to let go of their autonomy, agency and causes low self - esteem and confidence.

### Findings and Results

In an age where women are given the same opportunities and have the same legal rights as men, they are still ill-treated. Women still have not achieved the same social standing yet. For instance, women experience sexism and misogyny in the workplace. They are addressed as 'girls' and are undermined as well as underpaid. Women are expected to excel in public spaces but are pressurized to be traditional simultaneously.

Society tries to control adult women through infantilization, while on the other hand, they sexualise young girls. This sexualization occurs when society normalises and makes a girl believe, whether implicitly or explicitly, that her value comes solely from her sexual appeal and her other characteristics are sidelined. Literary works like *Lolita* (1955), where a thirteen years old young girl is portrayed as a temptress and gets viewed as a possession by a man twice her age, are considered masterpieces and are romanticized even after the disdain shown by the authors. In such works, the writer deliberately characterizes the female characters as super naive or changes the nature of the character as they

please and puts them in situations where they must submit to the misogynistic demands.

### Conclusion

Hypersexualizing young girls and infantilization of women are linked to negative mental health consequences. Experiencing this deplorable treatment from a young age can cause young girls to internalize the sexualisation and develop mental issues like low self - esteem, depression anxiety etc later in life. Normalised sexualisation is an ongoing issue today yet not it's not shedded light upon.

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