

Hutsuliak I.M.

Student (Master's Degree)

Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University

THE CONCEPT AND LITERARY REPRESENTATION OF GENDER ROLES

Abstract. *This article examines the concept of gender roles and their representation in literature. It explores how social expectations and cultural norms shape the behavior and life opportunities of men and women within patriarchal societies. Particular attention is given to nineteenth-century literature, where writers began to question traditional models of femininity and masculinity. The study analyzes how literary texts reflect economic, social, and emotional dimensions of gender roles and reveal their restrictive character for women. It also highlights literature's dual function: reinforcing traditional stereotypes while simultaneously offering alternative models of gender identity. Ultimately, literature is presented as an important medium for rethinking and transforming established gender norms.*

Key words: *gender roles, literature, femininity, patriarchy.*

Гуцуляк І.М. Концепція гендерних ролей та її відображення в літературі. У статті розглядається концепція гендерних ролей та їх репрезентація в літературі. Досліджується, як соціальні очікування та культурні норми формують поведінку і життєві можливості чоловіків і жінок у патріархальних суспільствах. Особливу увагу приділено літературі XIX століття, де письменники почали переосмислювати традиційні моделі жіночності та маскулінності. У роботі аналізується, як художні тексти відображають економічні, соціальні та емоційні аспекти гендерних ролей і виявляють їх обмежувальний характер для жінок. Також підкреслюється подвійна функція літератури: з одного боку, вона закріплює традиційні стереотипи, а з іншого – пропонує альтернативні моделі гендерної ідентичності. У підсумку література розглядається як важливий засіб переосмислення та трансформації усталених гендерних норм.

Ключові слова: *гендерні ролі, література, жіночність, патріархат.*

The Relevance of the research. This study is relevant as it examines how literature reflects and shapes gender roles, revealing social norms, inequalities, and cultural expectations. Understanding these representations helps analyze the historical construction of masculinity and femininity and informs contemporary discussions on gender equality.

The aim of the study. The article aims to explore how literature represents, critiques, and transforms traditional gender roles, highlighting the social, economic, and cultural factors that shaped men's and women's opportunities and identities.

Presentation of the main material. Gender roles represent a set of social expectations, behavioral norms, and cultural prescriptions that determine how men and women are expected to behave within a particular society. Unlike biological sex, gender roles are socially constructed and historically variable. They are shaped by cultural traditions, religious beliefs, economic conditions, and the political realities of each historical period. Literary texts play an important role in the construction and transmission of gender roles, as they not only reflect dominant ideas about masculinity and femininity but also actively influence the formation of these perceptions in the minds of readers.

In traditional patriarchal societies, gender roles were clearly differentiated and hierarchical. Men were typically associated with active and public roles connected to politics, business, science, and the arts, while women were largely confined to the private sphere of the home and family. O. Yakovlieva examines the gender stereotype of femininity in the context of Christmas rituals in traditional Ukrainian culture, noting that “women's roles in traditional society were closely linked to reproductive functions, household responsibilities, and the preservation of family traditions” [8, p. 189]. These traditional perceptions of women's roles were widely reflected in folklore and classical literature, where women were often portrayed as the keepers of the hearth, obedient wives, and self-sacrificing mothers. For example, in Coventry Patmore's poem *The Angel in the House*, which directly promotes the image of a devoted and submissive wife. The text not only idealizes female self-sacrifice but also limits women's identity to their roles within the home.

The division between the public and private spheres formed the foundation of the patriarchal social order. The public sphere, which included politics, economics, science, and the arts, was traditionally considered a male domain where events shaping the fate of nations and societies took place. In contrast, the private sphere, limited to the home and family, was regarded as a female space characterized by emotional relationships, domestic responsibilities, and personal interactions. This dichotomy was not neutral: the public sphere was consistently valued more highly than the private one, which automatically placed women in a subordinate position. Literature frequently reinforced this division by depicting male characters as active participants in public life, while female characters were represented as caretakers of domestic comfort and family stability. This division is clearly illustrated in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, where male characters such as Mr. Darcy participate in social and economic life, while female characters are primarily concerned with marriage and domestic matters.

Literature of the nineteenth century became a space for intense debates about the nature and limits of women's roles. The novels of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and other women writers of the period questioned traditional ideas of femininity, revealing the restrictive character of the social norms that regulated women's lives. S. Filonenko notes that "as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century, Jane Austen challenged the idea that a woman's only purpose was a successful marriage, portraying her heroines as individuals with complex inner lives and personal aspirations" [6]. In Austen's novels, women are forced to balance social expectations with their own desires, as well as economic necessity with emotional needs.

Gender roles in literature are closely connected with the concept of socialization, that is, the process through which individuals internalize the norms and values of their society. Literature demonstrates how, from early childhood, girls and boys are taught different patterns of behavior, life goals, and expectations. Girls were raised as future wives and mothers and were taught domestic skills such as household management, needlework, music, and drawing – abilities that were meant to make them attractive in the marriage market. Boys, in contrast, were prepared for an active role in society and were given an education that opened the path to professional careers and social recognition. This pattern is depicted in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, where Jane receives limited educational opportunities compared to men but still strives for intellectual and personal independence.

In her study of the literature of Great Britain and Ireland, N. Polevshchuk notes that "Victorian literature paid considerable attention to the upbringing of girls, preparing them to fulfill the traditional female roles of wife, mother, and mistress of the household" [5, p. 267]. At the same time, however, there was also literature that criticized this approach to female education and exposed its restrictive nature. Coming-of-age novels often portray the conflict between a heroine's natural inclinations and the social expectations imposed upon her. Heroines who possess intellectual abilities or aspirations for knowledge and creativity frequently face the need to conceal these qualities or abandon them in order to conform to the ideal of femininity.

An important characteristic of gender roles is their complementary and interdependent nature. Masculine and feminine roles were constructed as opposites that nevertheless complemented one another. Romantic literature created idealized images of masculinity and femininity based on the notion of the natural complementarity of the sexes. Men were portrayed as rational, strong, and active, while women were depicted as emotional, gentle, and passive. This dichotomy reinforced unequal power relations between the sexes, in which masculinity was viewed as normative and dominant, while femininity was seen as secondary and dependent.

B. Shaw, in his work on Romanticism, criticizes the idealized perceptions of gender roles characteristic of Romantic literature, arguing that they do not correspond to reality and create unhealthy expectations [7, p. 89]. Indeed, the gap between literary ideals and real life often became a source of tragedy, a theme reflected in numerous literary works. Women who were raised on romantic novels frequently expected life to bring passionate love, romantic adventures, and perfect happiness. When reality proved far more ordinary and mundane, it often led to deep disappointment and personal crisis.

The character of Madame Bovary in Gustave Flaubert's novel is a classic example of how romanticized ideas about women's roles can destroy a woman's real life. Emma Bovary, raised on romantic literature, is unable to accept the monotony of provincial life and the limitations of her role as the wife of a rural doctor. Her attempts to realize her romantic fantasies in real life ultimately lead to tragedy. This character has become a symbol of the conflict between literary ideals of femininity and the actual possibilities available to women in a patriarchal society.

Gender roles in literature are often closely connected with questions of power and control. Patriarchal society imposed strict restrictions on women's behavior, mobility, sexuality, and self-expression. Women who violated the roles prescribed to them faced social condemnation, rejection, and punishment. Control over female sexuality was particularly strict. Unmarried women were expected to remain chaste, while married women were required to demonstrate absolute fidelity. Even the slightest hint of sexual impropriety could permanently destroy a woman's reputation and deprive her of social status.

E. Gosse, in his literary portraits, analyzes the lives of nineteenth-century women writers such as Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), and the Brontë sisters, who were forced either to conceal their authorial identity or struggle for recognition within a male-dominated literary world [3, p. 178]. The very necessity of using male pseudonyms demonstrates how strictly women's roles were controlled in Victorian society. Writing was often considered an inappropriate occupation for a respectable woman because it moved her beyond the private sphere into the public domain. A woman writer therefore challenged the established gender order by claiming intellectual authority and a public voice – privileges traditionally reserved for men.

Literature as an art form possesses a unique potential for critiquing and reinterpreting traditional gender roles. Through artistic imagery and narrative, writers can reveal the absurdity, injustice, and restrictive nature of social norms that regulate gender relations. Realist literature of the nineteenth century was among the first to systematically challenge traditional gender roles, exposing their harmful consequences for women. The novels of George Eliot, such as *Middlemarch*, and

Thomas Hardy's works like *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, portray the tragic fates of women who fail to conform to rigid social expectations. For example, in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the governess position represents one of the few socially acceptable professions for women, though it places them in an ambiguous social position.

Particular attention should be paid to how gender roles shape the life opportunities and prospects of literary characters. Male characters in classical literature are presented with a wide range of possible life paths: they may become soldiers, diplomats, scholars, entrepreneurs, travelers, artists, or clergymen. Their identity is not reduced to their marital status – an unmarried man does not lose social recognition and may even acquire the reputation of an interesting bachelor. In contrast, female characters are often confined to a few basic scenarios: marriage, motherhood, and occasionally employment as a governess or companion.

The limited life opportunities available to women were one of the central themes of the nineteenth-century English novel. An unmarried woman without personal means found herself in a particularly precarious position. She could not independently earn a respectable living, since professional activity was largely closed to women of her social class. At the same time, she remained dependent on the goodwill of relatives, who might support her but could just as easily refuse assistance. For such a woman, marriage was often the only viable option, though it did not guarantee happiness or even basic comfort. This situation is clearly illustrated in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, where the Dashwood sisters face financial insecurity due to inheritance laws, and in *Pride and Prejudice*, where marriage is presented as the primary means of securing a stable future for women. This economic dependence is depicted in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, where women's financial security depends almost entirely on marriage, as well as in *Jane Eyre*, where the heroine seeks financial and personal independence.

The issue of gender roles in literature is closely connected with economic factors. For women of the upper and middle classes in Victorian England, economic dependence on men was a crucial reality. The prohibition against paid work for respectable women meant that their economic survival depended on a fortunate marriage or inheritance. Such dependence reinforced and perpetuated traditional gender roles, making women reliant on male authority and goodwill. Under these circumstances, marriage often functioned less as a union of two people in love and more as an economic arrangement in which a woman exchanged her personal freedom for financial security.

Conclusions. Literature plays a crucial role in representing and transforming gender roles. In particular, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and*

Sensibility reveal the economic dependence of women and critique the institution of marriage as a social necessity. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* redefines femininity by presenting a heroine who strives for independence, dignity, and equality in relationships. George Eliot's *Middlemarch* portrays the intellectual aspirations of women and the limitations imposed on them by society, while Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* exposes the injustice and double standards applied to female sexuality. These works demonstrate how literature not only reflects but also challenges traditional gender stereotypes, contributing to their rethinking and transformation.

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