

The emergence of the 'New Woman': Identity and Empowerment in Sara Duncan's *A Daughter of To-Day*

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Abstract

A new idea called the "New Woman" became popular in the late 1800s. This woman was educated, independent, and wanted freedom from traditional rules made by society and family. Rules such as patriarchy, limited education, following social norms, marriage priority, dependence on men, and obeying them were very unjust. Women were treated unfairly not only in their own families but also in society. This paper studies and analyzes these ideas in the novel *A Daughter of To-Day*, written by Sara Jeanette Duncan. The main character, Elfrida Bell, is shown as a New Woman who wants to live her life in her own way. She does not follow society's expectations. Using feminist ideas from thinkers and theorists like Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, and Sally Ledger, this paper examines how the novel *A Daughter of Today* by Sara Jeannette Duncan shows both the strengths and struggles of women. The "New Woman," Elfrida, is a very strong and independent woman. She faces many problems because society does not fully accept her bold and courageous nature and personality. So, the paper concludes that women's empowerment is not easy—it is a difficult journey with many challenges.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Gender Roles, Autonomy, New Woman, Feminism, Identity, Empowerment,

Theoretical Framework:

Feminism-

To examine the representation of women and their struggles, the feminist literary theory provides a critical lens to understand how women are shown in stories and how they struggle to make their own existence and status in a male-dominated society. Simone de Beauvoir famously argues that

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine." (Beauvoir 273)

Beauvoir emphasizes that a woman is not born with fixed qualities. Society teaches and decides how a woman should talk, dress, act, think, and behave like a woman. She says that a woman's identity is not decided by biology, money, or mind but by society and culture. This concept of Beauvoir is central for understanding Elfrida Bell's character, as she attempts to redefine her identity beyond traditional expectations.

Similarly, in her book *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter introduces the concept of gynocriticism,

She asks,

"I have needed to ask why women began to write for money and how they negotiated the activity of writing within their families. What was their professional self-image? How was their work received, and what effects did criticism have upon them? What were their experiences as women, and how were these reflected in books? What was their understanding of womanhood? What were their relationships to other women, to men, and to their readers? How did changes in women's status affect their lives and careers? And how did the vocation of writing itself change the women who committed themselves to it." (Showalter 13).

Showalter focuses on women's writing and experiences. Showalter asserts that women's literature reflects a distinct female consciousness shaped by social and cultural conditions. She wants to understand, why women started writing, especially to earn money, how they managed writing with family responsibilities, how they saw themselves as writers, how society treated and criticized their work, how their real-life experiences as women appeared in their books, what they thought about being a woman, their relationships with men, women, and readers, how changes in society affected their lives and careers and how writing itself changed their personality and life. Showalter's questions align with Duncan's novel *A Daughter of Today*, which portrays women's internal and external struggles and identity.

Sally Ledger has described 'New Woman' as a figure of independence, modernity, and education, and yet also a source of cultural anxiety. She explains, "The New Woman had manifested herself in multifarious guises in fiction and in the periodical press throughout the 1880s and 1890s. The 'wild woman', the 'glorified spinster' the 'advanced woman' the 'odd woman', the 'modern woman...the 'revolting daughters'-all these discursive constructs variously approximated to the nascent 'New Woman' As she was apprehended at the end of the nineteenth century, the New Woman was predominantly a journalistic phenomenon, a product of discourse"(Ledger 2).

According to Ledger, in the 1880s and 1890s, the idea of the 'New Woman' appeared in many different forms in stories and newspapers. She was described using different names like "wild woman," "modern woman," or "advanced woman." All these names were just different ways of talking about the same new type of independent woman. At that time, the 'New Woman' was mostly created and shaped by media and writing (journalism and literature), not just real life.

In the present world, the 'New Woman' also challenges traditional gender roles. Because of this conflict, many people strongly criticized and attacked the idea of the 'New Woman.' This creates a tension in society. That is, she faced strong opposition. Thus, this theoretical framework helps to analyze Elfrida Bell's journey as a struggle for autonomy, identity, and empowerment within a restrictive society.

Elfrida Bell is the protagonist of *A Daughter of Today*, by Sara Jeanette Duncan. She represents the New Woman of the late nineteenth century, who is educated, ambitious, and desires independence in her career. She wants to be a writer. She challenges traditional gender roles by seeking her artistic and personal freedom. She rejects societal expectations of marriage and domestic life. Her bold, conventional behavior makes her a clear example of the New Woman figure.

1. Elfrida Bell's Quest for Identity:

Elfrida Bell is the 'New Woman' who tries to find her own identity. Society expects women to marry and take care of the home and children. The patriarchy restricts such women from staying in the house and obeying their husbands. They are supposed to do their duties near the hearth, but Elfrida does not want all things in her life. She wants to become a writer and live independently. According to Simone de Beauvoir, women must go beyond society's rules to become their true selves. Elfrida is doing the same. But society does not support her, so she faces many problems while pursuing her career as a writer. Elfrida wants to be herself, but society tries to control her. Instead, she seeks intellectual and artistic fulfillment. Elfrida argues with Janet, her friend, that,

...And of course, the men are not affected by it. But for women, it is degrading- horrible. Especially for women like you and me, to whom life may mean something else....Besides, the commonplaceness, the eternal routine, the being tied together, the-the domestic virtues! It must be death, absolute death, to any fineness of nature. (Duncan 126-27)

Duncan portrays Elfrida as both ambitious who possesses big dreams, and at the same time, she is emotionally weak. This highlights her psychological complexity in identity formation. Her journey to find her identity is not simple. She is strong, but she also feels confused. Her struggle suggests that empowerment is not merely about external freedom but also about internal self-realization.

2. Elfrida's assertion of independence and freedom:

Elfrida wants to be an independent woman financially and intellectually. She does not want to depend on men like other housewives. Virginia Woolf emphasizes the importance of financial and intellectual independence for women, stating that "a woman must have money and a room of her own" (Woolf 4). It means that a woman needs money and her personal space to succeed in her life. But Elfrida's lack of economic stability, however, becomes a significant obstacle in her journey. Despite her efforts, she does not have economic support, so her dreams become difficult. She is intellectual, as she engages in discussions and expresses her opinions that challenge societal norms. She wants to write about burlesque women as she feels their lives are picturesque. She tells her friend, Mr. Cardiff, One of the Chorus girls has two children. I feel a brute sometimes at the way she...she brings their little clothes into my bedroom to make, though there is no need; they are in an asylum. She is divorced from their father...and he is married to the young lady. (Duncan 160)

She understands women's miserable lives from a woman's perspective. She is a new woman who thinks about the social and familial status of a woman who suffers mentally. This reflects her feminist idea that empowerment always involves both material and intellectual freedom.

3. Conflict with Patriarchal Structures

Elfrida lives in a society where men have more power. Her ideas and ambitions are often ignored or not taken seriously in her own family by her parents also. Mr. Bell Elfrida's father wants her to marry like other common girls. He educates her to support her life. It makes clear that there is no use of learning for women, and after marriage, motherhood is the true source of pleasure for women. In the novel, this is shown when Elfrida is not respected by her own father since he possesses a male-dominating nature. Men control society, so Elfrida's dreams are not valued. Kate Millett argues that patriarchy operates through social and cultural institutions, reinforcing male dominance (Millett 25). He explains that society supports male dominance. In the novel, this is evident in the way Elfrida's ambitions are trivialized. Her relationships with men further illustrate this power imbalance. While she seeks intellectual companionship, she often faces people who treat her as if she is less important or less intelligent, and they also do not understand her properly. This highlights the limited space available for women to express themselves freely. The author, Sara Duncan, does not openly attack patriarchy. Instead, she shows it in small, social interactions, through the life of Elfrida Bell.

4. The New Woman: Possibilities and Limitations

Elfrida is a New Woman—independent and modern. But she also faces many struggles. Sally Ledger notes that the New Woman was often depicted as both progressive and problematic, reflecting society's ambivalence (Ledger 10). Elfrida's character exemplifies this duality. Her ambitions and independence make her a symbol of progress, but her struggles and ultimate limitations imposed by patriarchy highlight the challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society.

Duncan's portrayal of Elfrida suggests that empowerment is not a straightforward process. Her journey to freedom is not easy. This is complicated since a woman has to balance what she wants with what society expects from her. Elfrida wants to become a famous writer. But the society does not accept her intellect. Elaine Showalter argues that women's writing is a means of reclaiming voice and identity (Showalter 25). Elfrida's writing aspirations symbolize this process.

Conclusion

A Daughter of To-Day offers an insightful study of the 'New Woman' through the character of Elfrida Bell. Through a feminist framework, this paper has shown that Elfrida's journey reflects the struggle for identity, independence, and recognition in a patriarchal society where women's thoughts are restricted by male domination. While she explains the ideals of the New Woman, her limitations highlight the barriers that become obstacles in female empowerment. The novel suggests that true empowerment requires not only individual determination but also structural change that must exist in society. Elfrida's story mirrors the ongoing struggle for gender equality and self-awareness.

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