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"I'm not gonna let anybody put me in a cage": Representation of women and their battle against the 'cage'.

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Abstract: Women persistently confined and stifled by the cages of patriarchy sought to break free of the shackles and breathe the same air of independence and freedom accessible to the men but appeared to be a distant reality for women. With the emergence of the feminist ideal of 'New Woman' in 1894, the world saw the birth of such female characters who would take the reins of their lives in their own hands, depriving men and patriarchy of the control that had been perpetuated since the beginning of time. This paper aims to explore how women across time, culture and society shatter the glass ceiling of their age imposed upon them by patriarchy, assert their identity in a male-dominated patriarchal society, reject the conventional social norms, shatter the idea of the damsel in distress and emerge as their own knight in shining armour.

Keywords: women, feminism, new women, gender.

Women persistently confined by the cages of patriarchy in their roles, stifled inside the household and with the concept of 'Angel in the House', sought to break free of the shackles and breathe the same air of independence and freedom accessible to the men but rendered unattainable for the women. By the late nineteenth century, with the emergence of the feminist ideal of 'New Woman', a term coined in 1894 by the Irish writer, Susan Grand to refer "to women who exercised control over their own lives be it personal, social, or economic" (Ruth Bordin), women strived to avenge the ghosts of their predecessors.

The idea of 'New Woman' was however fluid, with each writer writing their own version of the 'New Woman'. The first trace of the concept of 'New Woman' could be identified in Maria Edgeworth's Belinda (1801) and Elizabeth Barrett's Aurora Leigh (1856), which explored the social construct of a woman's need for matrimony to be socially accepted and their desire and the possibility of pursuing their artistic ambition. While Nora leaving her husband in search of her identity in Henrick Ibsen's A Doll's House (1879) was seen outrageous then, it illustrates that women are not as frail as the patriarchal society claims them to be. Henry James' The Case of Rebellious Susan (1894) and George Bernard Shaw's controversial Mrs. Warren's Profession (1893) and Candida (1898) further expanded the potential of the revolution. Bram Stoker's Dracula (1897) establishes the two aspects of the 'New Woman' with Lucy Westenra representing women as naïve but sharing the "New Woman's desire for sexual equality" as observed by Carol A. Senf and Mina as the rational and conscious heroine with a "man's brain…and a woman's heart" (Stoker). While Mina does not subscribe to the stereotypical idea of the New Woman destroying the patriarchy, she later acknowledges in her journal that "…I suppose the New Woman won't condescend in future to accept; she will do the proposing herself."

The identity of women which was defined by the male-dominated society eventually crumbled as women took it upon themselves to establish their identity and make the world a breathable and liveable place for women. In Louisa May Alcott's 1868 novel Little Women, Jo March's yearning for freedom and emancipation without conforming to the social mores and standards is not just restricted to the Victorian Era but resonates strongly in the modern world of the 21st century. Jo's monologue thwarts Freud's idea of women as a representation of a void, a lack: "Women, they have minds, and they have souls, as well as just hearts. And they've got ambition, and they've got talent, as well as just beauty. I'm so sick of people saying that love is all a woman is fit for." The dialogue remains etched onto the minds and is a constant reminder that women are powerful enough to shatter the glass ceiling of their age imposed upon them by patriarchy.

Jo March, who resembles her creator, refuses to be constricted by marriage and the roles assigned to the 'angel in the house' by declining the proposal of marriage by Laurie. She is a revolution in

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herself inspiring her sisters to live for themselves and attempting to dissuade Meg from getting married. Meg embodies the 'angel in the house' in her perfect lady-like attributes and desires to get married and have children. In contrast, Jo exclaims "It's bad enough to be a girl anyway, when I like boy's games and work and manners. I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy…go and fight with papa, and I can only stay at home and knit, like a poky old woman!" (Alcott). Kate Millet like Simone de Beauvoir before her believed that women were subjected to an artificially constructed idea of the feminine. Jo discards the idea of being a little woman and a seamstress and rather wishes to be the man of the family and sent to war, an idea that surfaces in the character of Arya Stark in Game of Thrones. Jo's 'masculinized' role is further illustrated in her supporting of her family through her writing. She lives on her wish to become the man of the family by providing for the basic needs including groceries as well as a vacation to the seaside through her earnings, thereby subverting the idea of women being dependent on men.

In one of her letters to a friend in 1869, Alcott writes, "Girls write to ask who the little women will marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman's life… I won't marry Jo to Laurie to please anyone." The fact that although Alcott wished Jo to end up as a "literary spinster" much like herself, she eventually had to yield to the demands of her publishers and create Friedrich Bhaer as a match for her, is echoed in Greta Gerwig's adaptation of Alcott's novel, Little Women (2019) with Jo in her publisher's office negotiating the ending of her novel. Jo's exchange with her publisher, "I suppose marriage has always primarily been an economic proposition. Even in fiction", reminisces that of Amy's with Laurie "So don't sit there and tell me that marriage isn't an economic proposition".

The dichotomy that features between Jo and Meg is easily discernible between the Stark sisters, Arya and Sansa of Game of Thrones (2008–2019), adapted from George R.R.Martin's fantasy novels, A Song of Ice and Fire and A Game of Thrones. While Sansa with her propriety, fine needlework, and adherence to the feminine duty expected of a woman to marry represents the 'angel in the house', Arya's disinterest in the same (except for the special 'Needle' gifted to her by her half-brother Jon Snow in the form of a sword) makes her a rebel. She wishes to become "a king's councilor and build castles and become the High Septon," and is more interested in warfare than being a lady, evident in her multiple utterances: "I wasn't playing. And I don't want to be a lady" and "But I'm not a lady. I never have been. That's not me". Arya desires to forge her own identity and men could be her guides and teachers, but her never her savior. She establishes the fact that she can fend for herself and survive in the world without being tied down to a man, "I don't need saving" thus subverting the idea of the distressed damsel saved by her knight in shining armour.

Arya Stark resists the limits of femineity and pushes her way through the world of men. While Sansa desires to be a queen and endures the abuse and humiliation of the Lannisters, Arya becomes an avenger with a list, seeking vengeance from those who wronged her family and led to their deaths. Masquerading as a beggar boy and a servant girl to elude the Lannisters, and travelling with the Brotherhood without banners, a group of mercenary warriors, Arya Stark makes her way to Bravos to become the faceless assassin. Retribution comes down upon Lord Walder Frey in 'The Winds of Winter' (Season 6, Episode 10) who betrayed the Starks and slaughtered Lady Catelyn, the eldest son of Lord Eddard Stark, Robb and his pregnant wife, Talisa in 'The Rains of Castemere' (Season 3, Episode 9) in the form of the youngest Stark daughter, Arya, who serves him a pie made of his two sons before slitting his throat. She also kills the Night King in the Great War, a danger that had been hovering over the Seven Kingdoms since the first episode of the show, 'Winter Is Coming'.

Arya chooses her freedom and independence as manifested in her decision to venture off to unexplored territories of the 'West of Westoros', rather than staying back in the Seven Kingdoms and assisting her siblings.

The idea of rejecting the notion of being restricted by social constructs that curb the freedom and independence of women is personified in Holiday "Holly" Golightly of Breakfast at Tiffany's, adapted from Truman Capote's 1958 novel of the same name. Holly is defined by her restlessness, spontaneity and vigour which are later revealed to mask her loneliness. Having escaped from the clutches of being a child bride, Holly refers to herself as a "wild thing" who refuses to be caged by any means, thereby emphasizing her freedom: "Never love a wild thing, Mr. Bell," Holly advised him. "That was Doc's mistake. He was always lugging home wild things. […] But you can't give your heart to a wild thing: the more you do, the stronger they get. Until they're strong enough to run into the woods. Or fly into a tree. Then a taller tree. Then the sky." (Capote).

She is an independent woman in control of her own life and sexuality who makes her living by providing companionship to various wealthy men.

Holly's response to the proposal of Paul Varjak where he claims that she belongs to him is powerful enough to shatter the notion of women's identity being intrinsically linked with that of a man: "People don't belong to people. I'm not gonna let ANYBODY put me in a cage." Holly's refusal to be confined to a "cage" reiterates her rebellious nonconformist attitude to the patriarchal structures that stunt women's empowerment. Holly Golightly warps the prevailing ideology of cinema which the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her book Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema presents as "…as the narrative progresses, she falls in love with the main male protagonist and becomes his property, losing her outward glamorous characteristics, her generalized sexuality…" by being her own person according to her whims and accords. In cinema a desirable woman serves as a means to further the male protagonist's interest and the audience looks forward to him claiming the woman and completing her. Though Holly in Blake Edwards' adaptation ends up accepting Varjak's proposal who convinces her to stay in New York, Capote's Holly retains her liberated, nonconformist, free-spirited self, exploring the world, and resembling the youngest Stark daughter.

The bold, independent, confident, fearless and career-driven Robin Scherbatsky of the American sitcom How I Met Your Mother (2005–2014) too finds a place alongside the nonconformist characters of Jo March, Arya Stark and Holly Golightly in her determination to live life according to her terms. Desjarlais in his journal 'How I Met Your Masculinity: Contrasting Male Personas Portrayed on How I Met Your Mother' states that "Robin's character is assumed masculine-male types of the ensemble with her own masculinity… [she] is not portrayed as a traditionally feminine woman… and puts her career before her romantic life". After her relationship with Barney ends, when Robin decides "From now on, no more dating. It's all about work," Ted and Marshall's insistence that she is "gonna fall in love" and that it is "so gonna happen" overshadows her wish to be respected for her decision, subtly highlighting the criticism an independent career- driven woman encounters for not wanting to be in a relationship. This reinstates the idea of a woman needing a man to stabilize her life and resolve her problems for her.

In 'Something Blue' (Season 2, Episode 22), Robin expresses her need to be free, not confined to any restricted role when she insists, "I never want to get married. I never want to have kids. I want to travel the world and be a successful journalist." Eventually, though Robin's desire to not get married changes, she maintains her wish against having children: "I don't want children. I will never want children, I don't even want to adopt." In a society where the fulfilment of a woman's existence is validated by matrimony and motherhood, Robin Scherbatsky emerges as a threat to that patriarchal order. Mulvey states that "Women then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier of the male other" and can gain "entry into the symbolic" only by means of a male heir. Robin's rejection of motherhood and her assertion of power through her social and economic independence could be seen as the ultimate subversion of the concept of the 'angel in the house' as she strides on to live her chaotic way, achieving her dreams of becoming a successful journalist and travel the world.

Freud's theory of psychoanalysis that establishes women as 'castrated', devoid of sexuality and powerless is overthrown by the portrayal of women characters who assert their identity in a male-dominated patriarchal society, reject the conventional social norms, shatter the idea of the damsel in distress and emerge as their own knight in shining armour. Women's need for social, economic and sexual independence arose due to their perpetual suffering, oppression and abuse at the hands of the society. Women writing their own stories, fighting their own battles, avenging their loved ones, refusing to be caged, and abandoning romance to chase their dreams must be everything our silent predecessors ever dreamt of.

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