



## **The Concept of Women in Chaucer's Works**

*Zaheed Ahmed Qazi*

Govt SCS Degree College Mendhar

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### **ABSTRACT**

Chaucer's female narrators are realistic women; they do not lack the dimension of humanity. They are not predictable like the characters of the male tales; they have their own distinctive voices to express hopes inconsistent with the system which they are a part of society. They were taught to be obedient to their husbands and were expected to run the household and raise children. Their role in the society, however, was much more complex, while some medieval women achieved a high level of equality with men. In the Middle Ages women had a secondary role, coming second after men

**KEYWORDS: -TALES, WOMEN SOCIETY, HOPES, REALISTIC**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The question of authority in the man - woman relationship in the Middle Ages was a predominant one. Women were constantly vying to gain a superior position over men in matters relating to love, sex and marriage. This was not an easy task for them considering the low social status they occupied. They were economically dependent on their men folk and most of them had little or practically no formal education. In addition, the attitude of the Church did much to strengthen the notion of woman's inferiority, for even as a human being she came second in position to man. Being born of Adam's ribs, she could not claim superiority of status and was expected to be submissive to man in all matters.

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### **Women in the ideology of chaucer**

Women's life In the present section, I shall attempt to give a brief social picture of the condition of women in the middle Ages. Medieval society was, as was society till the nineteenth century, very much a male-oriented one, with man dominating almost every sphere of life. The higher echelons of society consisted of earls and dukes and knights who were either engaged in warfare defending their lands in times of trouble or ruling the kingdom during times of peace. We get a cross-section of medieval society in the General Prologue. As F.N. Robinson remarks: "Individual as the pilgrims are, they are also representative. Many of them exhibit types of character or of professional conduct - the gentle Knight, the hypocrite in the person of the Pardoner - such as were familiar in the literature of the age. And taken together, they cover nearly the whole range of life in Chaucer's England. The circle of the royalty and the higher nobility, to be sure, is not directly represented. Men of such rank and station could hardly have been included in the company."<sup>1</sup> Knights were an esteemed class who upheld the Order of Chivalry. The Knight in the General Prologue is a "verray, parfit gentil knyght" who has fought in the Crusades. We get a panoramic view of the medieval scene in Langland's Piers the Plowman too. As William falls asleep one summer's day, he sees in his dream s "A fair felde ful of folke" - and among them are ploughmen, minstrels, jesters, beggars, knaves, pilgrims, palmers, hermits, friars and so on. He also beholds a king who is surrounded by his knights. Apart from the King and the nobility, the Church exercised a great influence on the common man in the Middle Ages. It was a very powerful institution and was responsible for moulding much of the religious and social thoughts of the day. Characters of the clergy, both good and bad appear frequently in medieval literature. Apart from the knights and the clergy, in education, in trade and commerce, in law and in medicine too it was a man's world. Most trade was in the hands of men, and women were confined to spinning and weaving. The Merchant in the General Prologue is a "worthy man with alle" and busy with his "bargaynes" and "his chevysaunce" . The Shipman is a hearty, jovial fellow, tanned and weatherbeaten who has travelled about. University men came from all walks of life - the highest and the lowest - the rich and the poor. The two clerks in the Reeve's Tale are poor Cambridge students and there is a "poure scolere" (3190) lodging with the carpenter in the Miller's Tale. The Wife of Bath's fifth husband is a Clerk of Oxenford and we have as one of the pilgrims another Clerk of Oxenford. There are references to clerks in Piers the Plowman too. In Passus III, when Meed is brought before the King, the Justices promise to help her and so do the clerks. In return she promises to love them and make them lords. Skilled men and women in the Middle Ages belonged to the Craftgilds. This is one sphere of life where men and women worked on more or less a similar footing. Though the number of women in these guilds was much less compared to the men, there were skilled women workers too. In the General Prologue, too, we see a medley of them. From the survey that we have just made, it presents a clear picture to the mind that man's position was dominant in medieval society. In every sphere of life, it was totally and wholly a man's world. Woman was man's inferior not only in physical prowess but also socially and in terms of intellectual scopes.

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## CONCLUSION

Regarding wives, Theophrastus says : " A wise man therefore must not take a wife for in the first place his study of philosophy will be hindered, and it is impossible for anyone to attend to his books and wife. Matrons want many things costly dresses, jewels, great outlay, maid-servants, all kinds of furniture, litters and gilded coaches to support a poor wife is hard : to put up with a rich one is torture. Notice, too, that in the case of a wife you cannot pick and choose; you must take her as you find her. If she has a bad temper, or is a fool, if she has a blemish, or is proud, or has bad breath, whatever her fault may be - all this we learn after marriage." And then again, "If a woman be fair, she soon finds lovers; if she be ugly, it is easy to be wanton. It is difficult to guard what many long for. It is annoying to have what no one thinks worth possessing. ..." The Church Fathers often turned to the Scriptures for ready reference. There they found plenty of examples which they could use to their own advantage. St. Jerome says: "Do you wish, to be reassured that it is as we say? Samson was stronger than a lion and harder than rock. Alone and without armour he put to flight a thousand men. In the embraces of Delilah he became weak. David was chosen as a man after the Lord's heart, and with his holy lips he had often prophesied the coming of Christ, yet after he was ensnared by the naked beauty of Bath while walking on the roof of his house, he -added murder to adultery." He also points to Solomon, the very incarnation of wisdom who went back from the Lord because of women and he also refers to Amnon who was inflamed by incestuous love for Tamar, his sister. Thus we see that the patristic teachings repeatedly stressed the superiority of the spirit over the flesh in the eternal strife between the two. And since woman symbolized the fall of reason or the degradation of the spirit, she was often chastised severely. All such teachings handed down as a legacy had a great impact in shaping and forming thoughts regarding women in the Middle Ages and we see its echoes from time to time in the literature of the period. Women were generally held as inferior beings and treated as such. In the writings of Chaucer however, we do not find any attempt at belittling women; on the contrary, there is a consistent picture of sympathy for women on the author's part and an underlying tone of appreciation for their quick wit, as the subsequent chapters will clearly illustrate.

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