

**RESEARCH TITLE**

**The Decline of the concept of Female Virtue in the English Novel:  
A Literary and Moral Critique from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century to the Post-  
CEDAW Era**

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**Abstract**

This study investigates the literary and moral transformation of the concept of female virtue in the English novel from the 17th century to the post-CEDAW era. It traces the evolution from early portrayals of chastity, modesty, and religious obedience—as in *Pamela*, *Shamela*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*—to modern and contemporary depictions that emphasize autonomy, emotional honesty, and sexual liberation, as seen in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Fear of Flying*, *Conversations with Friends*, and *The Girl on the Train*. The research employs a descriptive-analytical method, integrating moral criticism, feminist literary theory, cultural criticism, and selective Islamic ethical perspectives to examine how historical, ideological, feminist, and global influences—particularly the adoption of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)—have reshaped female moral representation. While acknowledging the advances in women's empowerment, the study critiques the erosion of virtue as a cornerstone of character and societal integrity, noting that contemporary literature often normalizes moral ambiguity at the expense of ethical coherence. The paper proposes a moral and educational roadmap for restoring a balanced vision of virtue that harmonizes freedom with responsibility, through curriculum reform, ethical media representation, and cross-cultural dialogue. It concludes that literary criticism should bridge liberation and moral responsibility, ensuring that evolving gender narratives continue to uphold values that promote dignity, justice, and cultural cohesion.

**Key Words:** Female virtue, English novel, CEDAW, feminism, moral critique, gender representation, literary ethics, 17th–21st century literature, chastity, women's empowerment.

## تدهور مفهوم الفضيلة النسائية في الرواية الإنجليزية: نقد أدبي وأخلاقي من القرن السابع عشر إلى ما بعد اتفاقية سيداو

### المستخلص

تبحث هذه الدراسة التحول الأدبي والأخلاقي في مفهوم الفضيلة النسائية في الرواية الإنجليزية منذ القرن السابع عشر وحتى عصر ما بعد اتفاقية سيداو. وتتبع الدراسة مسار التطور من التصوير المبكر للعفة والحياء والطاعة الدينية - كما في روايات بامبلا وشامبلا وجين إير وتيس من آل ديربرفيل - إلى الصور الحديثة والمعاصرة التي تركز على الاستقلالية، والصدق العاطفي، والتحرر الجنسي، كما في روايات عشيق الليدي تشاترلي والخوف من الطيران ومحادثات مع الأصدقاء وفتاة القطار. وتعتمد الدراسة المنهج الوصفي التحليلي، مستندة إلى النقد الأخلاقي، والنظرية الأدبية النسوية، والنقد الثقافي، مع دمج انتقائي لوجهات النظر الأخلاقية الإسلامية، لفحص الكيفية التي أعادت بها المؤثرات التاريخية والفكرية والنسوية والعالمية - وخاصة اعتماد اتفاقية القضاء على جميع أشكال التمييز ضد المرأة (سيداو) - تشكيل صورة الأخلاق النسائية في الأدب. وبينما تُقر الدراسة بما تحقق من تقدم في مجال تمكين المرأة، فإنها تنتقد تآكل الفضيلة باعتبارها ركيزة أساسية للشخصية والنزاهة المجتمعية، وتشير إلى أن الأدب المعاصر غالبًا ما يطبع الغموض الأخلاقي على حساب التماسك القيمي. وتقرح الورقة خارطة طريق تربوية وأخلاقية لاستعادة رؤية متوازنة للفضيلة تتسجم فيها الحرية مع المسؤولية، وذلك من خلال إصلاح المناهج، والتمثيل الإعلامي الأخلاقي، والحوار بين الثقافات. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن النقد الأدبي ينبغي أن يجسر الفجوة بين التحرر والمسؤولية الأخلاقية، لضمان أن تواصل السرديات الجندرية المتطورة الحفاظ على القيم التي تعزز الكرامة والعدالة والتماسك الثقافي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الفضيلة النسائية، الرواية الإنجليزية، سيداو، النسوية، النقد الأخلاقي، تمثيل النوع الاجتماعي، الأخلاقيات الأدبية، أدب القرنين السابع عشر - الحادي والعشرين، العفة، تمكين المرأة.

## 1. Introduction:

The concept of female virtue has long occupied a central place in the moral and literary imagination of societies. It was a recurring theme in literature, especially the novel, reflecting and shaping the moral compass of the societies. In early English fiction, particularly during the 17th and 18th centuries, virtue was more than an individual trait — it was a social and moral ideal, intimately linked to chastity, modesty, domesticity, and religious commitment. Novels such as *Pamela* by Samuel Richardson and *Clarissa* established the heroine's virtue as the moral compass of the narrative, rewarding moral integrity and punishing moral transgression. In these works, the female character's value was often measured by her adherence to prescribed codes of conduct, reflecting both societal expectations and the didactic function of literature at the time. The elevation of female virtue in these narratives mirrored a societal framework where morality was not only gendered but seen as a cornerstone of social order.

As the novel evolved, however, so too did the portrayal of women and their relationship to traditional virtue. The Victorian period, while still largely moralistic, began to expose the tensions between private morality and public hypocrisy, as seen in novels by Charles Dickens, the Brontë sisters, and George Eliot. The early 20th century introduced even greater shifts. With the rise of feminist thought, secularism, and the breakdown of rigid moral codes, female characters in literature increasingly became complex, conflicted, and self-determining — no longer defined solely by their chastity or obedience. Works by Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, and later feminist authors like Margaret Atwood and Alice Walker reimagined virtue through lenses of autonomy, resistance, and sexual freedom. The noble heroines of earlier centuries were gradually replaced by women who sought freedom, fulfillment, and justice—sometimes at the cost of traditional moral values.

In the postmodern and post-CEDAW era, following the 1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, literary treatments of female virtue have largely moved away from moral absolutes. Contemporary narratives often celebrate personal choice and identity over collective moral values, sometimes portraying traditional virtue as a form of oppression rather than an ideal. Literature has at times overlooked the intrinsic value of virtue—not as a constraint on women but as a humanistic quality essential for ethical coherence in society. While this shift has opened space for new forms of empowerment and representation, it has also sparked concerns about the erosion of moral responsibility, especially from traditional, religious, or culturally conservative perspectives.

This study seeks to trace this literary and moral evolution, examining how female virtue has been constructed, deconstructed, and, in some cases, dismissed across different historical periods in the English novel. It aims to highlight the forces — literary, ideological, feminist, and global — that have contributed to this transformation, while also considering whether literature today can reconcile artistic freedom with ethical responsibility. Through a critical analysis of selected novels from the 17th century to the present. An Islamic moral perspective will be incorporated where possible. This paper explores the implications of virtue's decline for literary criticism, gender identity, and the role of fiction in shaping moral consciousness. It also explores how literature has moved from reverence to revisionism, and proposes a roadmap to restore balanced and ethical representations of womanhood through education and cultural renewal.

## 2. Problem of the Study:

Over the centuries, the concept of female virtue — encompassing chastity, modesty, moral uprightness, and societal responsibility — has been central to the literary portrayal of women. In early English novels, virtue was idealized, equated with personal dignity and social acceptance. However, with the emergence of modern and postmodern literature, particularly after feminist movements and global conventions like CEDAW, this notion has undergone a dramatic transformation. Contemporary novels often present virtue as outdated, restrictive, or subjective. This shift raises crucial questions about the role of literature in shaping, reflecting, and sometimes eroding moral and cultural values. The central problem of this study is to explore how and why the literary representation of female virtue has declined over time, and what implications this has for readers, educators, and moral discourse.

## 3. Significance of the Study:

The study contributes to literary criticism by tracing thematic and ideological shifts in the portrayal of women across centuries. The study intersects with gender studies, morality, and societal values, offering insight into how changing depictions of virtue affect perceptions of femininity and ethics.

For educators, this study may support curriculum decisions that balance moral development and critical awareness of evolving gender narratives.

In societies where traditional or religious understandings of virtue remain influential, such as Islamic contexts, the findings may spark interdisciplinary dialogue between literature, faith, and ethics.

## 4. Objectives of the Study

- a. To examine how female virtue is portrayed in selected English novels from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the present.
- b. To trace the shift in moral values associated with femininity across different literary periods.
- c. To explore the cultural, political, and feminist influences contributing to the transformation or erosion of female virtue in literature.
- d. To evaluate the impact of global instruments such as CEDAW on literary depictions of women.
- e. To propose an integrative perspective that reconciles literary freedom with ethical and cultural responsibility.

## 5. Study Questions:

- a. How was female virtue defined and represented in early English novels?
- b. What factors have contributed to the decline or transformation of this virtue in later literary works?
- c. Can literature today still serve as a medium for promoting positive moral values without compromising artistic freedom?

## 6. Previous Studies:

A number of previous works have tackled aspects of morality, gender, and literature, including:

The American professor Nancy Armstrong in her book *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, 1987: A

Political History of the Novel, explores how domestic novels shaped middle-class morality and feminine ideals.

The American professors and literary critics, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 1979: *The woman writer and the Nineteenth –Century Literary Imagination*. This feminist classic analyzes 19<sup>th</sup> -century literature by women introduces the idea that women writers were forced to create double selves—one obedient and one rebellious. The title refers to Bertha Mason, the "madwoman" in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, as a symbol of women's repressed rage and creative energy discuss how female characters were framed in patriarchal literature.

The American professor Elaine Showalter, who was born in the UK in her book, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* 1977, revised 1982 offers a feminist history of women writers and how their works evolved over time.

All the four authors are alive, as of 2025. No credible sources indicate otherwise; their works and honours continue to receive attention.

Many Post-CEDAW gender studies investigate how legal and political frameworks, such as the CEDAW Convention, affect women's representation in various cultural mediums, including literature. There are a lot of studies on Pamela, Clarissa, and Victorian novels. These focus on chastity, social acceptance, and gendered morality, establishing a foundation for comparing with modern representations.

However, few studies have systematically traced the moral decline of the ideal of female virtue from early moralistic novels to post-CEDAW narratives, nor have many incorporated a comparative ethical framework that includes religious or moral traditions. This paper addresses that gap.

## 7. Limits of the Study:

Place: Khartoum state, University of the Holy Quran and Islamic Sciences .

Time: 2025

Content: Two novels from each era , including Pamela and Shamela (17<sup>th</sup> &18<sup>th</sup> century), *Jane Eyre* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (19<sup>th</sup> century), *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Fear of Flying* (20<sup>th</sup> century), *Conversations with Friends* and *The Girl on the Train* (the contemporary age)

## 8. Study Methodology:

The researcher followed the descriptive analytical method with the usage of library research.

## 9. Theoretical Framework:

The study draws on the following theoretical approaches;

Moral Criticism that is evaluating literature's role in moral instruction and the consequences of detaching art from ethics. Feminist Literary Theory; analyzing the evolving roles, images, and voices of women in literature, with focus on agency, objectification, and virtue politics. In the Cultural Criticism; examining how social norms, historical movements, and global conventions shape literary trends and character portrayals. Islamic Ethical Perspective (where relevant); as an optional comparative lens, especially when suggesting moral renewal, an Islamic view of virtue may be incorporated.

## 10. Female Virtue in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries Novel:

The Puritan movement (a religious movement in first part of the 17th century) in literature

may be considered as the second and greater Renaissance, marked by the rebirth of moral nature of Man which followed the intellectual awakening of Europe in 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The culture which was brought by the Renaissance was mostly sensuous and pagan and needed some sort of moral sobriety and profundity which were contributed by the puritan movement. John Bunyan (1628-1688) was the greatest story-teller of Puritanism. To him also goes the credit of being the precursor of the English Novel. His greatest book (*The Pilgrim's Progress*, 1678) is Christian allegory was aimed to lead men and women into God's way. He was deeply religious; all that he knew and learned was derived straight from the English Bible. All his works born of moral earnestness and extreme sincerity.

The chief literary contribution of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was the discovery of modern novel which at present is the most widely read and influential type of literature. Jonathan Swift (1668-1745) was a highly intellectual figure, he wrote; *The Tale of a Tub* which was written in the form of allegory, and exposes the weakness of the main religious beliefs opposed to the Protestant religion. It is also a satire upon all science and philosophy. Samuel Richardson (1689-1761) was credited with the writing of the first modern novel-*Pamela or Virtue Rewarded*. Considered the first true English novel, it serves as Richardson's version of conduct literature about marriage. *Pamela* tells the story of a fifteen year-old maidservant named Pamela Andrews, whose employer, Mr. B, a wealthy landowner, makes unwanted and inappropriate advances towards her after the death of his mother. Pamela strives to reconcile her strong religious training with her desire for the approval of her employer in a series of letters and, later in the novel, journal entries all addressed to her impoverished parents. After various unsuccessful attempts at seduction, a series of sexual assaults, and an extended period of kidnapping, the rakish Mr. B eventually reforms and makes Pamela a sincere proposal of marriage. In the novel's second part Pamela marries Mr. B and tries to acclimatize to her new position in upper-class society.

*Evelina, or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* is a novel written by the English author Frances Burney (1752- 1840), first published in 1778.

In this novel, title character *Evelina* is the unacknowledged but legitimate daughter of a dissipated English aristocrat, and thus raised in rural seclusion until her 17<sup>th</sup> year. Through a series of humorous events that take place in London and the resort town of Hotwells, near Bristol, *Evelina* learns to navigate the complex layers of 18<sup>th</sup>-century English society.

Early English novels frequently positioned virtue—particularly female virtue—as a central moral and redemptive force, reinforcing the prevailing social and religious values of their time. Characters that embodied chastity, modesty, and moral fortitude were often rewarded with social acceptance or divine providence. Such narratives served not only to entertain but also to instruct readers on moral conduct, especially women, within a patriarchal framework.

At the same time, satire emerged as a powerful literary device to criticise the discrepancies between proclaimed values and actual societal behavior. Writers like Henry Fielding and Jonathan Swift used irony, exaggeration, and ridicule to expose the hypocrisy embedded in social, religious, and political institutions. Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, for instance, parodies Richardson's moral seriousness while unmasking pretensions of piety and decency among the upper classes. This dual narrative strategy—upholding virtue while mocking false morality—allowed early novelists to both affirm and question dominant ideologies. It also reflects the novel's formative role as a space where moral ideals and social criticism could coexist, ultimately laying the groundwork for the more complex moral landscapes of later fiction.

From Islamic point of view: *Pamela's* resistance reflects the Qur'anic praise for women who protect their honor:

“And those who guard their private parts.” (Qur’an 23:5).

In *Evelina*, upholding modesty in corrupt surroundings parallels the Islamic value of *haya*’ (modesty) for both genders.

### 11. Female Virtue in the 19<sup>th</sup> - Century Novel:

The novels produced during this period took various shapes; sermons, political pamphlets, philosophical discourse, social essays, autobiographies, and poem in prose.

The 19<sup>th</sup> -century novel emerged within a rapidly changing social and moral landscape shaped by industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of the middle class. As Britain moved from an agrarian to an industrial society, traditional social structures were disrupted. The growth of factories and cities led to the dislocation of rural populations, the breakdown of extended families, and the rise of poverty, crime, and overcrowding in urban centers. These social transformations brought about a heightened sense of anxiety regarding morality, social order, and female behavior, particularly among the middle and upper classes.

In response, the Victorian period witnessed an intense movement for moral reform. This reform was closely linked to the evangelical revival, which emphasized personal responsibility, piety, and self-discipline. Female virtue—associated with chastity, modesty, and domesticity—became a central tenet of the so-called Victorian moral code. Women were idealized as the moral guardians of the home, a counterbalance to the perceived moral decline of the public sphere. Literature of the time both reflected and reinforced these ideals, often portraying heroines whose value was tied to their purity and moral steadfastness.

However, this ideal was under constant pressure. The novel became a space where these tensions were explored, criticised, and sometimes subverted. Authors such as Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot examined the consequences of rigid moral expectations on women’s lives, especially those who failed to conform. Through narratives of virtue tested by poverty, seduction, or social prejudice, the 19<sup>th</sup> -century novel interrogated the validity and cost of moral ideals in an age of economic upheaval and social change. Thus, while virtue remained a central theme, it was increasingly portrayed as something under siege—by society, by circumstance, and by the very ideals that claimed to uphold it.

#### 11.1. *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë':

The protagonist's journey highlights a conflict between personal integrity and societal expectations, particularly within the constraints of Victorian society. Jane's struggle involves navigating gender roles, class distinctions, and moral dilemmas while striving for independence and self-respect. Her choices often prioritize her moral compass and personal autonomy over societal norms, showcasing a radical redefinition of love, marriage, and female identity.

Jane's moral compass is a guiding force throughout the novel. She grapples with difficult decisions, often prioritizing her own sense of right and wrong over social expectations. Her departure from Thornfield, despite her strong feelings for Rochester, exemplifies this, as she chooses to preserve her integrity rather than compromise her moral principles.

Jane's journey is one of self-discovery and empowerment. She seeks to understand her own identity and find her own happiness, even if it means challenging societal norms and expectations.

Jane's pursuit of education and her career as a governess challenge the traditional role of women as solely homemakers.

In essence, *Jane Eyre* explores the tension between individual aspirations and societal

limitations, ultimately advocating for a more egalitarian and fulfilling vision of life for women, where personal integrity and self-respect are paramount. According to *The Conversation*, Jane's story resonates even today because of her unwavering commitment to her own values and her ability to find happiness and fulfillment on her own terms.

### 11.2. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), Thomas Hardy.

A powerful criticism of the moral hypocrisy and gender-based double standards of Victorian society. The novel centers on Tess Durbeyfield, a young working-class woman whose tragic fate is shaped not by her moral failings, but by a rigid and unjust social system that punishes women for transgressions—real or perceived—that it readily forgives in men.

Tess is portrayed as inherently pure, innocent, and morally strong. Yet after she is seduced—or arguably raped—by Alec d'Urberville, society no longer regards her as "virtuous." Hardy boldly opens the novel with the subtitle "A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented," challenging the Victorian ideal that equated female virtue solely with sexual chastity. Tess's suffering is not the result of vice but of her society's unwillingness to acknowledge the complexity of human experience and the inequity of holding women to impossible moral standards.

Angel Clare, Tess's love interest, embodies this societal contradiction. While he confesses to a youthful indiscretion, he cannot forgive Tess's similar experience, despite her honesty and lack of agency. His rejection highlights how women bore the full moral burden in matters of sexuality, regardless of consent or context.

Hardy's depiction of Tess is deeply sympathetic and deliberately political. Her downfall is not due to a lack of virtue, but to a society that refuses to see her as virtuous once she no longer conforms to its narrow definitions. By the end of the novel, Tess is both a victim of personal betrayal and a symbol of institutional injustice.

Through Tess's story, Hardy exposes the destructive power of societal double standards, making the novel a powerful indictment of Victorian morality and a timeless defense of female dignity and complexity.

From Islamic perspective: Jane Eyre embodies the Qur'anic ideal of *taqwa* (God-consciousness), showing self-restraint and inner virtue; while

Tess's story evokes the Qur'anic lesson of not blaming the victim (e.g., Maryam's vindication in Qur'an 19:27–28). Islam emphasizes both forgiveness and moral context over rigid judgment.

## 12. The 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Novel: The Rise of Liberation and Beginning the Decay of Female Virtue:

In modern times, the novel is the most important and popular literary medium. This popularity can be accounted for by the fact that while compression is the characteristic feature of both poetry and drama, examination of modern man under the influence of science requires discussion, calculation, and analysis. This wide scope of enquiry is only possible in the novel. Also the novel was the only literary form that met the needs of the modern world. The novel was the form which told the stories of the Second World War. No doubt, there are some differences in the trends, styles and themes in the novel as a literary form between the Victorian and the modern age.

The evolution of the novel in the modern and contemporary era reflects profound shifts in cultural, political, and moral consciousness. Beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the novel underwent significant transformations in both form and theme, mirroring the complexities of a rapidly changing

world. Modernist writers, reacting against Victorian moral rigidity and the perceived limitations of realism, introduced experimental techniques such as stream of consciousness, psychological depth, and fragmented narrative structures to explore the disillusionment, alienation, and identity crises brought about by industrialization, war, and the erosion of traditional belief systems. This literary movement paved the way for more radical departures in contemporary fiction, where postmodernism embraced irony, metafiction, and narrative multiplicity, while the rise of postcolonial, feminist, and minority voices further broadened the novel's scope. Within this expansive literary landscape, the depiction of female virtue—once idealized as synonymous with purity, domesticity, and submissiveness—began to undergo critical reassessment. Twentieth-century and contemporary novelists increasingly questioned, deconstructed, and redefined traditional gender roles, often portraying female characters that resist, subvert, or fall victim to the moral expectations imposed upon them by patriarchal society. This thematic shift marks a significant departure from earlier literary conventions and reveals deeper anxieties about virtue, sexuality, freedom, and identity in a modern world marked by feminist awakening, sexual liberation, and ongoing debates about morality and autonomy. The decline of female virtue in the novel, therefore, is not merely a literary trend but a cultural symptom—reflecting evolving attitudes toward women's roles, agency, and the very definition of virtue itself in the modern and postmodern imagination.

12.1. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, David Herbert Lawrence (1885–1930), known as D.H. Lawrence in his book *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) provocatively redefines female desire and moral agency. Through the character of Constance Chatterley, Lawrence criticises social repression and class division while embracing sexual fulfilment as a form of personal liberation, thus further dismantling the Victorian ideal of the passive, virtuous woman.

By mid-century, the changing roles of women during and after the World Wars are reflected in novels such as Doris Lessing (1919-2013) a British novelist and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 2007. In her *Book; The Golden Notebook* (1962), where the fragmentation of narrative mirrors the fragmentation of identity. Lessing's protagonist, Anna Wulf, embodies the intellectual and emotional tensions of a woman navigating love, motherhood, political ideology, and creative expression—all of which challenge the notion of virtue as obedience or self-sacrifice.

From Islamic point of view; *Lady Chatterley's Lover* reflects a shift away from 'iffah (chastity), a key Islamic moral value. Islam permits love and sexuality, but only within the sanctity of marriage. As for *The Golden Notebook*; Islam forbids shifting away from chastity, modesty, and moral coherence. While Islam values inner reflection and the integration of personal, social, and spiritual life. That is similar to Anna Wulf's search for unity. Islam encourages emotional and intellectual growth, but within the ethical framework of marriage, accountability to God, and stable family roles.

By the end of the twentieth century, even before the advent of international frameworks such as CEDAW, the concept of female virtue in the English novels had already begun to lose its traditional moral authority. Once upheld as the highest standard of womanhood—defined by chastity, modesty, and domestic obedience—virtue came to be viewed by many writers as a tool of patriarchal oppression. Literary heroines increasingly rejected or were destroyed by societal expectations that confined their identities to narrow moral roles. In the wake of industrialization, war, and feminist awakening, the novel embraced a new set of values centered on individual freedom, personal fulfillment, and self-expression. This freedom, however, often came at the cost of moral clarity, as narratives shifted from rigid codes of conduct to complex, often destabilizing explorations of sexuality, autonomy, and rebellion. The decline of virtue in literature did not merely reflect a collapse of morality but a

redefinition of what it meant to live authentically in a modern world. As traditional virtues were dismantled, freedom became the new ideal—praised not for its conformity to moral norms, but for its power to liberate women from the silence, shame, and subjugation once masked as virtue.

12.2. In the contemporary era; *The Girl on the Train* (2015) by: Paula Hawkins; a British novelist who is still alive aged 52 years. This psychological thriller centers on a woman named Rachel, who becomes entangled in the mystery of a missing woman. The novel explores themes such as infidelity, alcoholism, emotional instability, and sexual exploitation. The female characters are portrayed as emotionally broken, unfaithful, or manipulative, with little regard for moral or spiritual values. The novel showcases a breakdown in traditional female virtues such as modesty, loyalty, and emotional stability. Women's identities are largely shaped by their relationships with men, and virtue is often compromised for personal freedom or desire.

In Islam, *iffah* (chastity), *haya'* (modesty), and emotional strength are core virtues for both men and women. The novel's portrayal of women engaging in deceit, extramarital affairs, and substance abuse contrasts sharply with the Islamic ethical code that promotes purity, self-control, and accountability before God. Islam encourages women to maintain moral dignity and personal responsibility, avoiding any behavior that compromises modesty or faith.

Another book ; *Conversations with Friends* (2017) by: Sally Rooney; an Irish novelist born in 1972, only 31 years old.

This novel follows two young women, Frances and Bobbi, as they navigate relationships, sexuality, and identity in contemporary Ireland. The protagonist engages in an affair with a married man, and the narrative treats such behavior as emotionally complex but morally neutral or even liberating.

Virtue is redefined in secular and postmodern terms—centered on emotional honesty and autonomy rather than morality or commitment. Adultery and casual intimacy are normalized, while modesty and marital fidelity are absent from the moral discourse.

From an Islamic perspective, such narratives reflect the erosion of divine moral boundaries. Islam categorically prohibits adultery (*zina*) and promotes marriage as a sacred bond. Female virtue is seen not as oppression, but as protection, honor, and spiritual strength. The normalization of affairs and emotional entanglements outside of marriage is a serious violation of Islamic ethics, which warn against even approaching *zina*(adultery) (Quran 17:32).

In both novels, which are written by female novelists, the portrayal of women often revolves around emotional instability, loss of modesty, infidelity, and sexual freedom—which are interpreted in modern literature as expressions of empowerment or realism. However, Islamic teachings promote chastity, modesty, and faithfulness as essential aspects of a virtuous life, protecting both individual dignity and social cohesion. These novels reflect a cultural shift away from traditional moral frameworks, one that Islamic ethics would view as a sign of spiritual and social decline.

### **13. CEDAW: The Greatest Overwhelming Calamity.**

Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979, is widely regarded as the international bill of rights for women. It provides a comprehensive framework for advancing gender equality and eliminating discrimination against women in all spheres of life, including education, employment, healthcare, political participation, and family relations. CEDAW obliges signatory states to take appropriate legal, administrative, and social measures to

ensure women enjoy full equality with men and protection from discrimination based on sex or gender. Unlike declarations or resolutions, CEDAW is a binding treaty that requires countries to report regularly to the UN Committee on their progress in implementing its provisions. The Convention also addresses cultural and traditional practices that undermine women's rights, urging nations to challenge societal norms that perpetuate inequality. By highlighting both legal reforms and social transformation, CEDAW has significantly influenced feminist movements, human rights advocacy, and national legislation around the world. Its impact is not limited to policy; it has also shaped literature, media, and education, providing a global framework within which writers and thinkers criticise and reimagine the roles, identities, and moral expectations imposed on women in modern and contemporary societies.

#### **14. Some Muslim Scholars See Not All CEDAW Articles Are Bad:**

Many Muslim scholars and activists hold a middle position; they reject some specific CEDAW demands that appear to conflict with traditional family law, but endorse other articles (for example, equality in education, political participation, and protection from violence). Movements such as Musawah (Equality) a global Muslim equality network of scholars, activists and lawyers — argue that the core principles of CEDAW (equality, dignity, non-discrimination) can be reconciled with Islamic teachings and used to reform discriminatory family laws. Musawah publishes research and policy briefs showing pathways for implementing CEDAW-consistent reforms in Muslim contexts.

Prominent legal scholars like Azizah al-Hibri advance a similar position; rather than rejecting international norms wholesale, they call for reinterpreting Islamic law (ijtihad) and using constitutional and human-rights frameworks to protect women's rights. Al-Hibri's work shows how Islamic jurisprudence and human-rights law can interact to support many CEDAW objectives while debating contested items.

Islamic feminists such as Amina Wadud and allied scholars also argue that a gender-just reading of the Qur'an and Islamic tradition supports women's equal access to education, public life, and protection from violence — aims that overlap strongly with many CEDAW provisions. These scholars typically call for selective, context-sensitive adoption of CEDAW measures together with domestic legal reform.

#### **15. Beyond CEDAW: Accelerated Moral Decay Followed by Bitter Criticism:**

CEDAW which was adopted in 1979, aimed to eradicate gender-based inequality. However, critics argue that it inadvertently instigated a moral rupture, eroding traditional values of modesty, chastity (iffah), and the sanctity of the family. Subsequent cultural shifts—most notably the legalization of same-sex marriage—are seen as symptomatic of a broader decay in established moral and religious norms.

Regarding some moral ambiguities of the Convention; some critics such as Bonn Anjali Sara Bonner, a legal scholar highlights that many predominantly Muslim states either rejected CEDAW outright or acceded with reservations, especially regarding family law provisions, citing incompatibility with Sharia. This underscores the perception that CEDAW conflicted with enduring religious and social values.

Feminist and cultural scholars also underscore structural limitations within CEDAW. Article 28 allows expansive reservations, enabling states to ratify the treaty while maintaining discriminatory practices, such as unequal inheritance or restrictions on women's mobility. Critics argue these compromises the Convention's moral authority and transformative potential.

Other academics question CEDAW's conceptual premises. Some argue the Convention prioritizes a homogenized, liberal-humanist framework of autonomy — neglecting gendered realities and cultural nuance. In essence, they claim the Convention introduced a uniform model of individual rights that collides with collective, faith-based conceptions of virtue and moral integrity.

Since CEDAW's adoption, societal norms have continued shifting. Same-sex marriage, increasingly legalized, is framed by opponents as symptomatic of a deeper moral collapse. In Western contexts, critics like Maggie Gallagher ; born in 1960 is an American writer, socially conservative commentator, and activist argues that redefining marriage fundamentally undermines its procreative and societal purpose, warning of a loss of civilizational coherence .

The anti-gender movement, fuelled by religious and conservative actors, reflects resistance to expanding notions of gender identity and equality, which are often conflated with moral relativism.

From this perspective, CEDAW represented more than legislative reform—it was a moral departure from traditions that valued chastity, family structure, and gender complementarity. The treaty's flaws—its diluted implementation, cultural insensitivity, and permissive reservation regime—laid the groundwork for more radical social transformations. While defenders of CEDAW emphasize women's empowerment and human dignity, critics contend that the post-CEDAW era has witnessed an unrestrained slide in moral foundations, symbolized by the embrace of same-sex marriage and broader challenges to conventional ethics. The trajectory, they argue, demands critical re-evaluation of how rights are framed and the cultural contexts in which virtues flourish.

## **16. A Moral and Educational Roadmap for Restoration:**

As literature reflects and shapes the moral fabric of society, it is imperative to consider the broader social institutions—particularly education, family, and cultural discourse—that play a critical role in either sustaining or restoring the ideal of virtue, especially as it relates to women. While modern literature has expanded the portrayal of female experience, it is through education and cultural formation that a balanced vision of womanhood—one that includes both freedom and ethical responsibility—can be cultivated and preserved.

In past centuries, moral education was largely tied to religious instruction and gendered social norms. Young women were taught to uphold chastity, obedience, modesty, and decorum. While these teachings were often restrictive and rooted in patriarchal control, they nonetheless aimed to instill a coherent moral vision. The danger today is not that those specific virtues have been replaced, but that virtue as a moral concept has lost its value altogether in some educational and cultural spaces. When autonomy is taught without ethical direction, freedom can become unmoored from purpose.

Contemporary education, particularly in literature, humanities, and gender studies, now emphasizes critical thinking, identity exploration, and liberation from traditional roles. These are valuable developments, yet they must be paired with ethical literacy—the ability to discern right from wrong, to empathize across difference, and to act responsibly in relationships and society. Without this moral grounding, female empowerment risks becoming synonymous with mere individualism or defiance, rather than responsible agency.

A reimagined educational model should aim not to revive outdated codes of behavior, but to cultivate internalized virtues that guide ethical decision-making. These include:

- a. Integrity: the consistency between belief and action.

- b. Compassion: the ability to feel and act on behalf of others' suffering.
- c. Accountability: accepting the consequences of one's actions
- d. Self-respect and mutual respect.
- e. Moral courage: the strength to uphold principles even when unpopular.

Literature, when taught in this context, becomes more than entertainment or aesthetic study—it becomes a moral laboratory where students explore human motivations, ethical dilemmas, and the consequences of choice. Texts that portray female characters that grow in self-awareness and moral insight, regardless of their failures, can serve as powerful tools for restoring a sense of virtue among both women and men.

Moreover, family and community structures remain vital to shaping moral consciousness. In many cultures, including traditional African and Islamic societies, the concept of virtuous womanhood has been deeply tied to the roles of motherhood, caregiving, and community leadership. While these roles must be reinterpreted in light of modern gender equality, they should not be discarded. Societies should work to honor women's ethical contributions—not merely in terms of social activism or professional success, but in cultivating moral character, stability, and care within the community.

The media and cultural industries, too, have a responsibility. When popular films, television, and novels repeatedly glorify self-centeredness, vengeance, or moral ambiguity without consequence, they help normalize ethical disengagement. A new cultural paradigm is needed—one that celebrates women not only for breaking boundaries but also for upholding values that contribute to human dignity, justice, and collective well-being.

Lastly, religious and philosophical traditions still offer resources for moral formation. Whether through faith-based education or secular ethics, communities can draw on deep reservoirs of wisdom to frame virtue as strength, not submission; as inner freedom, not external conformity.

The restoration of virtue in the literary and social imagination must begin with education that integrates freedom with responsibility, society that values ethical character, and literature that models complexity without abandoning conscience. Female characters, like real women, are not better when they are passive or morally pure—but they are stronger when their freedom is grounded in moral vision. The future of literature and culture may well depend on our ability to reclaim virtue not as a burden, but as a guiding light.

## 17. Conclusion and Recommendations:

The decline of female virtue through the centuries in the English Novels is not merely a rejection of outdated moral codes but a profound reimagining of women's roles, rights, and identities in literature and society. From early modernist criticism of purity and sacrifice to post-CEDAW narratives that embrace complexity, autonomy, and moral fluidity, the novel has evolved into a space of ideological contestation and cultural reflection. While this transformation has empowered many voices and expanded the possibilities of female representation, it has also provoked legitimate concerns among religious and cultural communities about the erosion of moral frameworks. The task for contemporary writers, educators, and scholars is not to revert to past ideals, nor to accept all forms of liberation uncritically, but to engage in a more nuanced dialogue that respects both the dignity of individual freedom and the moral coherence of community values. Future literary criticism should seek to bridge the gap between liberation and responsibility, exploring ways in which virtue—broadly redefined—can coexist with freedom. Literature must continue to challenge oppression, but also interrogate the cost of moral detachment. Ultimately, a balanced literary and ethical approach is essential for societies that value both justice and cultural integrity.

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