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## BREAKING STEREOTYPES: THE ROLE OF CLOTHING IN GENDER IDENTITY IN LITERATURE

**D. GOPINATH**

Assistant Professor, Department of English  
National College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli

**VIJAY JOSHUA ALLEN**

Assistant Professor, Department of English  
National College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli

### *Abstract*

*Clothing in literature often serves as a powerful symbol, reflecting and challenging societal norms related to gender identity. This article explores how clothing is utilized in various literary works to subvert traditional gender roles and express complex identities. Focusing on Anita Nair's "Eating Wasps" and Virginia Woolf's "Orlando", the article examines how attire becomes a medium for characters to assert their autonomy, resist societal expectations, and explore fluid gender identities. Through these examples, the article highlights the significant role clothing plays in both character development and societal commentary, offering insights into the evolving portrayal of gender in literature.*

**Keywords:** *Superficial, Eating Wasps, Virginia Woolf's, Orlando, Self-Expression.*

### **Introduction**

In literature, clothing is far more than just a superficial detail; it often serves as a crucial symbol of gender identity and societal norms. Across various literary periods and genres, authors have used clothing to explore the complex relationship between gender, identity, and societal expectations. Attire can reflect the roles imposed on characters by society, or it can be used as a means of resistance, allowing characters to express their individuality and challenge the status quo. This symbolic use of clothing is particularly evident in works that focus on gender identity and the subversion of traditional gender roles. Clothing in such texts is often a site of tension between societal expectations and personal identity, revealing the internal conflicts characters face as they navigate these pressures. By examining how clothing is portrayed in literature, we can gain deeper

insights into the ways in which gender roles are constructed, reinforced, and challenged.

This article focuses on two key texts that exemplify the use of clothing as a symbol of gender identity: "Eating Wasps" by Anita Nair and "Orlando" by Virginia Woolf. In "Eating Wasps", clothing becomes a tool for characters to resist patriarchal norms and assert their autonomy, while in "Orlando", attire symbolizes the fluidity of gender identity, challenging the rigid boundaries between male and female. Through these analyses, the article aims to demonstrate how clothing in literature serves not only to reflect societal norms but also to subvert them, offering a critique of the limitations imposed by traditional gender roles.

### **The Power of Clothing in Gender Identity**

Clothing has long been a potent symbol of gender identity in literature, often serving as a visual representation of the societal roles assigned to characters. In many

literary works, attire is not just about fashion or practicality; it is a key element in the construction of a character's identity. Authors use clothing to signify conformity to or rebellion against societal expectations, making it a crucial aspect of how gender roles are portrayed in literature. For instance, traditional depictions of women in literature often include attire that reinforces their roles as passive, submissive, and ornamental. In contrast, male characters are frequently depicted in clothing that symbolizes power, authority, and action. However, when characters choose to wear attire that defies these norms, it often signals a deeper resistance to the roles imposed upon them by society. In such instances, clothing becomes a site of contestation, where characters can assert their individuality and challenge the status quo.

In "Eating Wasps", Anita Nair explores the lives of several women who struggle against the confines of a patriarchal society. One of the most compelling symbols of resistance in the novel is Sreelakshmi's choice to wear her father's watch. This seemingly small act carries significant symbolic weight, representing her rejection of traditional femininity and her desire to assert a more independent and self-defined identity. Sreelakshmi's decision to wear a man's watch, particularly her father's, is a direct challenge to the gender norms that dictate how women should present themselves. Watches, particularly those associated with men, symbolize authority, control, and the passage of time—qualities often denied to women in patriarchal societies, where their roles are largely confined to the domestic sphere. By choosing to wear her father's watch, Sreelakshmi is not only rejecting these constraints but also asserting her right to control her own life and time. This choice also reflects her internal struggle against societal expectations. In a society where women's identities are often shaped by their relationships with men—be it as daughters, wives, or mothers—Sreelakshmi's act of wearing her father's watch symbolizes her attempt to break free from these roles and define herself on her own terms. This symbolic act of defiance highlights the broader theme of resistance that runs throughout the novel, as the women characters struggle to assert their identities in a society that seeks to confine them. This can be seen in the following lines:

"In *Eating Wasps*, Nair writes, 'She slipped the heavy watch onto her wrist, the metal cool against her skin. It was her father's, and it felt like a shield, a small act of rebellion against a world that wanted her to be nothing more than a shadow' (Nair, *Eating Wasps*, p. 45). This moment encapsulates Sreelakshmi's rejection of traditional femininity and her assertion of a more independent identity.

Virginia Woolf's "Orlando" is another seminal work that uses clothing as a powerful symbol of gender identity, but in a very different context. "Orlando" tells the story of a protagonist who lives for centuries, changing gender from male to female along the way. Throughout the novel, Woolf uses clothing to explore the fluidity of gender identity, challenging the rigid binaries of male and female. In "Orlando", the protagonist's change in attire reflects their shifting gender identity. As Orlando transitions from male to female, their clothing changes to suits their new gender, but Woolf uses these changes to underscore the arbitrary nature of gender norms. For example, when Orlando, now a woman, dons male clothing, she feels no less herself; her sense of identity remains intact despite the outward change in appearance. This fluidity of gender, as symbolized by Orlando's changing attire, challenges the notion that gender is a fixed and immutable characteristic. Woolf's use of clothing in "Orlando" is a critique of the societal expectations that dictate how men and women should dress and behave. By blurring the lines between male and female, Woolf suggests that these expectations are not natural or inherent but are instead socially constructed and imposed. Through Orlando's journey, Woolf invites readers to reconsider the rigid boundaries of gender and to embrace a more fluid and inclusive understanding of identity.

**Clothing and Gender Identity:** You can refer to moments in the text where Orlando's changing attire reflects the fluidity of gender. For example:

"Woolf writes, 'He—the pronoun is still 'he' for the moment—was now in the act of putting on a pair of woollen stockings of a deep crimson colour which had been worn by the present Lord Treasurer on his own wedding night' (Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 133). This scene underscores how Orlando's identity transcends the gendered expectations of clothing, as his transformation into a woman is marked by a

continuation of self rather than a change in essence.

**Arbitrary Nature of Gender Norms:** You might cite the part where Orlando, now a woman, dresses as a man and feels unchanged: "Woolf illustrates this fluidity when Orlando, 'drawing a black cloak about her, went into the darkness where a knot of trees made a shelter, and there, taking her hat from her head and the buckles from her shoes, started off at a great pace, no longer Orlando the woman, but Orlando the man' (Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 189). This passage highlights how clothing serves as a symbol of society's imposed gender roles, which Orlando subverts.

**Critique of Societal Expectations:** When discussing Woolf's critique of societal norms: "In the novel, Woolf critiques the rigidity of gender expectations, writing, 'It is a strange fact, but it is unquestionably true that when Orlando became a woman and began to live as one, the pleasures of life increased greatly. This was partly due to the fact that she need no longer try to satisfy the claims of the world, which are so imperious and so hard to reconcile with those of the soul' (Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 158). This reflects how gender norms constrain individual identity, a theme Woolf explores through Orlando's journey.

#### **Implications for Character Development and Societal Commentary**

The use of clothing in these literary works has significant implications for both character development and societal commentary. In "Eating Wasps", Sreelakshmi's decision to wear her father's watch is a key moment in her character development, symbolizing her rejection of the roles imposed on her by society and her determination to assert her independence. This act of defiance is central to her identity and underscores the broader theme of resistance that defines the novel. Similarly, in "Orlando", the protagonist's changing attire is a reflection of their evolving identity, allowing Woolf to explore the fluidity of gender and challenge the rigid norms that govern it. Through Orlando's journey, Woolf critiques the societal expectations that confine individuals to specific gender roles, suggesting that identity is far more complex and fluid than these roles allow. In both cases, clothing serves as a powerful tool for exploring the tensions between individual identity and societal expectations. By using clothing to challenge

traditional gender roles, these authors offer a critique of the limitations imposed by society and invite readers to consider more inclusive and flexible understandings of gender identity. Clothing in literature often serves as a symbol that intersects with both social class and gender, revealing the complexities of identity within a given societal framework. The way characters dress can signal their social status, gender identity, and even their resistance to or acceptance of societal norms. This intersection is vividly portrayed in Anita Nair's "Eating Wasps", where Sreelakshmi's choice of attire becomes a symbol of defiance against both gender and class expectations.

In "Eating Wasps", Sreelakshmi's preference for wearing a salwarkameez, despite her mother's disapproval, is a powerful act of rebellion. The salwarkameez, a traditional yet modern garment, is seen by her mother as inappropriate for a woman of their social standing. Sreelakshmi's choice to wear this outfit, rather than more traditionally acceptable attire like a saree, symbolizes her rejection of the rigid class and gender norms imposed upon her. This choice is not merely about comfort or style; it is a statement of independence and a refusal to conform to societal expectations that seek to control her identity and self-expression. This defiance can be compared to the way clothing is used to reflect and reinforce social and gender roles in F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby". In this novel, clothing is a clear indicator of social status and the roles expected of men and women in the 1920s American society. Daisy Buchanan's elegant dresses and Tom Buchanan's tailored suits are not just markers of their wealth but also symbols of their adherence to the social norms of their class. Daisy's attire reflects her role as a desirable, ornamental woman, whose worth is tied to her beauty and her ability to maintain her status within the elite class. Tom's clothing reinforces his authority and dominance, both as a man and as a member of the upper class.

However, unlike the characters in "The Great Gatsby", Sreelakshmi's choice of clothing is not about maintaining or reinforcing her social status; rather, it is a means of challenge the very norms that seek to define her. Her decision to wear a salwarkameez is an assertion of her autonomy, rejecting the notion that her value is determined by her adherence to societal

expectations regarding class and gender. This act of defiance highlights the potential of clothing in literature to not only assert social status but also to challenge and subvert societal norms.

Clothing, therefore, becomes a powerful tool for both reinforcing and challenging societal structures. In "The Great Gatsby", it is used to maintain the status quo, emphasizing the rigid class and gender roles of the time. In contrast, in "Eating Wasps", Sreelakshmi's clothing choices serve as a means of resisting these roles, asserting her independence, and challenging the expectations placed upon her by society. Through these examples, it becomes clear that clothing in literature can be a multifaceted symbol, capable of both upholding and subverting the social order. Clothing in literature often mirrors the internal struggles of characters, particularly when it comes to issues of gender identity and societal expectations. Authors use clothing as a means to externalize the inner turmoil experienced by their characters, allowing readers to gain a deeper understanding of the psychological and emotional conflicts at play.

In "Eating Wasps", Sreelakshmi's clothing choices are a reflection of her internal conflict between societal expectations and her personal desires. Her decision to wear her father's watch, a traditionally masculine accessory, is symbolic of her struggle to reconcile her independent spirit with the restrictive norms of her society. This choice represents her desire to assert her individuality and resist the pressures to conform to traditional gender roles. However, it also reflects the tension she feels as she navigates the expectations placed upon her as a woman in a patriarchal society. This use of clothing to symbolize inner turmoil is not unique to "Eating Wasps". In James Joyce's "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man", the protagonist Stephen Dedalus's evolving attire reflects his internal journey toward self-discovery and artistic freedom. As Stephen rejects the strict religious and cultural expectations of his Irish upbringing, his clothing becomes a symbol of his rebellion and his quest for identity. Similarly, in Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar", Esther Greenwood's attire mirrors her deteriorating mental state. As she becomes increasingly alienated from society and struggles with her identity, her clothing

choices reflect her descent into depression and her rejection of societal norms.

In both of these works, as in "Eating Wasps", clothing serves as a tangible representation of the characters' internal conflicts. It allows the reader to see the ways in which societal pressures and personal desires clash, often leading to a deep sense of turmoil and unrest. Sreelakshmi's choice of attire, like that of Stephen Dedalus and Esther Greenwood, is not just about fashion but is deeply connected to her sense of self and her struggle to define her identity within a restrictive societal framework. These literary examples highlight how clothing can be used to externalize internal conflicts, making them more accessible to the reader. By focusing on the symbolic meaning of clothing, authors can provide insights into the psychological and emotional states of their characters, helping readers to understand the complexities of their struggles with identity, autonomy, and societal expectations.

The portrayal of gender and clothing in literature has evolved significantly over time, reflecting broader social changes and shifts in attitudes toward gender roles. Historically, clothing in literature was often used to reinforce traditional gender norms, with strict rules governing what was considered appropriate attire for men and women. However, as societal attitudes toward gender have become more fluid and inclusive, literary depictions of clothing have also changed, increasingly challenging these norms. In earlier works of literature, clothing was often used to reinforce the rigid gender roles of the time. For example, in medieval and Renaissance literature, men's clothing was typically associated with power, authority, and action, while women's clothing emphasized modesty, submissiveness, and domesticity. These depictions reflected the societal belief that men and women occupied distinct and separate spheres, with clothing serving as a visual marker of these roles. As literature progressed into the 18th and 19th centuries, the portrayal of clothing and gender became more complex, particularly in the works of female authors. Writers like Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters began to use clothing to subtly critique the limitations placed on women by society. In novels like "Pride and Prejudice" and "Jane Eyre", clothing is often used to symbolize a character's social status,



morality, and adherence to societal expectations. However, these works also hinted at the potential for resistance, with characters occasionally using clothing to assert their independence and challenge the roles assigned to them.

The 20th century saw a significant shift in the portrayal of clothing and gender in literature, as modernist and postmodernist authors began to use clothing to explore more fluid and complex identities. In works like Virginia Woolf's "Orlando" and James Joyce's "Ulysses", clothing became a symbol of the fluidity of gender and the breakdown of traditional norms. These texts challenged the idea that clothing and gender were fixed and immutable, instead suggesting that they were socially constructed and open to reinterpretation. Today, contemporary literature continues to push the boundaries of how clothing and gender are portrayed, reflecting the ongoing evolution of societal attitudes toward gender identity. Authors use clothing to explore and challenge traditional norms, offering new perspectives on the relationship between attire, identity, and societal expectations. This historical progression highlights the dynamic role that clothing plays in literature, serving as both a reflection of and a challenge to the evolving understanding of gender.

In literature, clothing often serves as a critical tool for defining or challenging gender identity. Two iconic texts where clothing plays a central role are Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" and Toni Morrison's "Beloved". Both of these works, like "Eating Wasps", use clothing to explore the complex dynamics of gender, power, and identity within oppressive societal frameworks. In "The Handmaid's Tale", the clothing worn by the women in the dystopian society of Gilead is highly symbolic of their subjugation. The handmaids, who are forced into reproductive servitude, wear red garments that not only signify their role but also erase their individual identities. The uniformity of their clothing is a powerful symbol of the total control the regime exerts over their bodies and identities, reducing them to mere functions of their fertility. Atwood uses clothing to highlight the rigid and dehumanizing gender roles imposed by a patriarchal society, making it a key element in the novel's critique of gender oppression. Similarly, in "Beloved", clothing

is used to explore the legacy of slavery and its impact on identity, particularly in terms of gender. Sethe's experience of choosing a simple dress for her daughter's funeral and later wearing it herself represents both her grief and her resistance to being defined solely by her past as a slave.

Clothing in "Beloved" becomes a way for characters to navigate their identities in the aftermath of trauma, symbolizing both their loss and their attempts to reclaim agency in a world that has sought to strip them of it. When compared to "Eating Wasps", these works illustrate how different authors use clothing to explore similar themes of gender, identity, and societal control. While Nair focuses on how women resist patriarchal norms through subtle acts of defiance in their clothing choices, Atwood and Morrison use clothing to depict the more overt oppression of women and the ways in which they navigate and resist these imposed identities. In all three cases, clothing serves as a powerful symbol of the characters' struggles with identity within a restrictive societal framework, highlighting the complex interplay between personal autonomy and societal expectations.

### **The Future of Gender Representation through Clothing in Literature**

As societal understandings of gender continue to evolve, literature will likely reflect these changes, particularly through the use of clothing as a symbol of identity. Future literary works may increasingly explore the fluidity of gender, using clothing to challenge traditional binaries and represent a wider spectrum of identities. Contemporary movements advocating for gender fluidity, non-binary identities, and the deconstruction of traditional gender roles are likely to influence literary depictions of clothing and identity. We may see more characters who use clothing not just as a reflection of their gender but as a way to actively resist and redefine it. This could include narratives that feature characters who mix traditionally masculine and feminine attire or who reject gendered clothing altogether in favor of more neutral or fluid styles. In speculative and dystopian fiction, clothing might be used to imagine new social constructs around gender, where the boundaries between male and female are either blurred or completely redefined. Additionally, as digital and virtual spaces become more prevalent, literature might explore how virtual

clothing and avatars impact concepts of identity and gender expression. The future of literature is likely to see clothing used in increasingly innovative ways to represent and challenge evolving concepts of gender, reflecting the ongoing shifts in societal attitudes and the continued push towards greater inclusivity and diversity in gender representation.

### Conclusion

Clothing in literature serves as a powerful tool for exploring and challenging gender identities and societal norms. Through the symbolic use of attire, authors can reflect the complex dynamics of gender, class, and identity, offering readers insights into the struggles characters face as they navigate these pressures. In works like "Eating Wasps", "The Handmaid's Tale", and "Beloved", clothing is not merely a detail of appearance but a crucial element that defines and challenges the roles assigned to characters by society. These literary examples demonstrate that clothing can both reinforce and subvert traditional gender roles, making it a key element in the critique of societal norms. As societal attitudes toward gender continue to evolve, literature is likely to reflect these changes, using clothing in increasingly innovative ways to explore fluid and diverse identities. The ongoing relevance of these themes in both literature and society underscores the importance of clothing as more than just a superficial aspect of character but as a profound symbol of the broader cultural and social forces that shape our understanding of identity. As literature continues to push the boundaries of gender representation, clothing will remain a powerful tool for authors to explore the

complexities of gender, identity, and societal norms.

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