

## Lysistrata, Agamemnon, and Sherlock Holmes:

### The Construction of the Subjugated Female in Classical and Victoria Literature

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Ashley Laura Danielle Reisinger

The construction of women in literature has always been a widely explored and hotly debated topic, not only because of the general trend of the authorship of females by men but also because of the social implications that reside within this construction. In his book, *Literary Texts and the Greek Historian*, Christopher Pelling says that "literature also helped in constituting the ideal, as one of the vehicles by which society mediated its values to its impressionable members."<sup>1</sup> Not only does literature reflect the cultural view of women but it also presents a cultural ideal. The classical and Victorian portrayal of women in literature is directly influenced by the women's adherence to cultural norms, or the appearance thereof. This serves as a method by which to further subjugate women by reinforcing their role in adherence to their position in society.

Despite the differing cultural positions of women in the classical era, the women that do not adhere to their cultural position are faced with both fear and reproach. They pose a threat to the accepted patriarchal dominance of society by being masculine in their mannerisms, and dominant in their position. In literature the covert, and sometimes overt insinuation is that women who deviate from the norms of society must be expelled from that society in one manner or another. Many classical works demonstrate this principle, but the characters of Lysistrata and Clytemnestra will be explored inasmuch as

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Pelling, *Literary Texts and the Greek Historian*. (New York: Taylor and Francis Ltd, 1999), pg.194, <http://content.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.macewan.ca/>

they demonstrate how cultural acceptance is only achieved through adherence to cultural norms. Lysistrata deviates from the caricature of the drunken, sex crazed women of Aristophanes' comedic representation of democratic Athens and is attacked both physically and verbally for it. She assumes a dominant position over both the women and the men, and is only re-accepted into the folds of her society when it is revealed that she desires to exercise her dominance only for a season; her ultimate desire is to return to the way things were. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the strong, 'man-like' character of Clytemnestra is the epitome of female deviation from cultural norms. Even in her position as the monarch's wife, she does not adhere to the expectations of a king's woman. She dominates her husband, controls him, cheats on him, and eventually exudes her extreme dominance by murdering him. She is never accepted back into society but is killed at the hands of her son, being permanently removed from the culture she refuses to adhere to. The Victorian reflection of this principle is Arthur Conan Doyle's character, Irene Adler. Her exhibition of masculine valor in relation to the expected feminine modesty of Victorian women lead to her being driven from London with the need to insure herself against the retaliation of the King of Bohemia. Nevertheless, it is Irene Adler's appearance of cultural adherence that counteracts many of the adverse effects that her deviation would otherwise generate.

To understand the position of Aristophanes' character Lysistrata, a contextual basis for women in classical Greece must be established. The cultural understanding of women was one that, in the view of the contemporary feminist, was highly restrictive. The role of women was a domestic position; their sphere was within the household and the higher their status, the higher their anonymity. Kate Gilhuly establishes this point in saying "it was

essential for a woman in her capacity as a citizen's wife to stay out of the public eye. Her anonymity was essential to her good name."<sup>2</sup> The roles wherein a woman could function in a more public sphere were in the role of *porne* (prostitute), *hetaira* (a sympotic entertainer), and priestess.<sup>3</sup> These public roles, specifically that of *porne* and *hetaera*, were sexualized positions wherein the woman was seen as being a commodity, or a means to an end. The exception would be the priestess; while the priestess' public role was not a highly sexualized one, she only served in her sacred position in a limited capacity and was expected thereafter to return to her anonymous position as a housewife.<sup>4</sup> Private women were more respected than those operating within the public sphere, and the increase of restriction upon a woman was in direct correlation with the increase of her husband's status.

In Aristophanes comedic play *Lysistrata*, the cultural commentary on women is rich. The world constructed is in democratic Athens while the Spartan and Athenian forces

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<sup>2</sup> Kate Gilhuly: *The Feminine Matrix of Sex and Gender in Classical Athens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 17.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 151-152:

Kate Gilhuly makes the observation that: our own strategies for schematizing women tend to infect our understanding of the way the Greeks represented the feminine, and the result is a reluctance to identify the priestess as a sexual woman. Yet, if attending Athena Nike's temple was an office awarded by allotment, then it makes sense for Myrrhine to be depicted as "a typical housewife," and none of this is inconsistent with having a sexual relationship with her husband. As [Douglas M.] MacDowell argues, *A priestess had the duty of performing certain rituals for a goddess, but that was not a full-time activity; a particular ritual would be due only on certain days, in some cases only one day each year. For the rest of the time she would live the same kind of life as other women, probably with a husband and children. Thus the fact that the women in the play have domestic lives and an interest in sex is in no way incompatible with the view that they are priestesses.*

are waging war against each other. The conflict has been ongoing, and the women are fed up with watching their men march off, both husbands and sons. The brazen character Lysistrata rallies the women and urges them to abstain from sex in order to force their husbands to negotiate peace with the Spartan forces. While in a contemporary setting this would seem to be a comment on some kind of feminist empowerment movement, it is important to note that this was not the assertion Aristophanes was making. In fact, Sarah Stroup argues that “women in this play are depicted as *hetairai*.”<sup>5</sup> The women are operating in a public sphere, they are refusing to adhere to the anonymity of the housewife position, and they are offering sex as a negotiable commodity. Sarah Stroup establishes that a *hetaera* engaged in a sex-business of sorts, generally with a single partner, and the *hetaera* “retained for herself a sense of control and autonomy.”<sup>6</sup> Certainly the women of Aristophanes’ comedic Athens negotiate using sex with their single partner (their husbands), and retain for themselves decision making power on this basis. This is not done within the sphere of wife, but as a *hetaera*, operating within a public realm. In addition, many of the women are depicted as being sexually motivated, drunken conspirators, “blatant mischiefs,” and fierce beasts.<sup>7</sup> They have all deviated from the expectation of the anonymous wife and because of this they are met with derision and

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<sup>5</sup> Sarah Stroup, “Designing Women: Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* and the Hetairization of the Greek Wife,” *Arethusa* 37, no. 1 (2003), quoted in Kate Gilhuly’s *The Feminine Matrix of Sex and Gender in Classical Athens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 154.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Stroup, “Designing Women: Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* and the Hetairization of the Greek Wife,” *Arethusa* 37, no. 1 (2003): 43, doi: 10.1353/are.2004.009.

<sup>7</sup> Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 261, 367, 1014.

hostility. They threaten the dominance of the men by forcing the hands of their husbands, and by obtaining for themselves political influence. As a result, the chorus of old men attempts to burn down the Acropolis with these deviant women inside it; "Let's get to work to build it up and then ignite the bonfire:/we'll burn them all at one fell swoop; not the least, the wife of Lykon."<sup>8</sup> Their aim is to remove these women who threaten the men's position and role.

Even inasmuch as the women are depicted as being these public, crafty, drunken, sex-crazed hooligans, and face ridicule because of it, it is Lysistrata that truly embodies Aristophanes' representation of a deviation from the cultural norm. If the women are considered the equivalent of *hetairai*, then their actions, while not being condoned, can still be understood and to some extent, can still be culturally accepted. It is expected that the *hetairai* are sexualized, and they are often expected to be as public figures as well. Lysistrata does not adhere to the private role of wife, or the public role of the *hetairai*. Instead, she operates as man; she exhibits masculine qualities and characteristics by proposing the sex strike, and maintaining her resolve while carrying it out. She is an organized woman who exhibits intelligence and even acknowledges the role of male figures in her life. She says "A woman I am, but not without sharp wits./ My own intelligence is quite robust/And hearing words of wisdom from my father/has added greatly to my education."<sup>9</sup> She does not 'scheme' against the men, but enacts a systematic plan to achieve an end goal. Her position cannot be accepted because she is operating in public while not holding a woman's public position in society. In addition, Lysistrata's position poses a threat to the normative relations between men and women. The

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<sup>8</sup> *Lys*, 269-270.

<sup>9</sup> *Lys*, 1124-1127.

woman is required to subject herself to the influence of her husband and may not assert her dominance over her man, or any other. Lysistrata, in rallying the women, dominates all men in the play. The men, particularly the character of the commissioner, respond by attempting to nullify the threat that Lysistrata poses. He commands his archers to “grab her round the waist.../I want her tied at once.”<sup>10</sup> It is not until it is made clear that her ultimate aim is to reunite the husbands and wives, and to restore the characteristic patriarchal dominance that the men refuse to see her as a threat.<sup>11</sup> In fact, once it is established that Lysistrata’s deviation is not intended to last, both the Athenian and Spartan men heed her advice; they portion out pieces of the woman Reconciliation in a symbolic act of peace, and return each man to his wife.

The reality for the character of Clytemnestra, is drastically different. Helene Foley, when cited in Kate Gilhuly’s book, *The Feminine Matrix of Sex and Gender in Classical Athens*, describes the situation that the readership must understand when coming to the texts of Greek drama; “While women in daily life appear to have been confined to the internal spaces of the household, to public silence, and to no-participation in the political life of Athens, women play an exceptionally prominent role in drama.”<sup>12</sup> In the realm of Greek drama women could not occupy the role of the anonymous because in-so-doing they would fail to be depicted. The fantastic narrations of female and male gods, or heroic men and their wives,

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<sup>10</sup> *Lys*, 438-439.

<sup>11</sup> *Lys*, 1175-1178.

<sup>12</sup> Helene Foley, “The ‘Female Intruder’ Reconsidered: Women is Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* and *Ecclesiazusae*,” *CP*: 77:1-21, 1982, quoted in Kate Gilhuly *The Feminine Matrix of Sex and Gender in Classical Athens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 5.

would have been made very near impossible if this were the case. Most Greek Drama's were set in a world where: humans [were] the blazing centre. Their motivations and concerns [generated] the action in the poem, while the gods were often reduced to the role of enablers or spectators...That the gods [were] so intensely concerned with warriors and their fates [elevated] the mortals to a special plane.<sup>13</sup>

Because of the special status the humans of Greek drama held, there was a strict expectation put upon women. This can be seen in the world of Euripides' *Trojan Women*, wherein the character of Andromache articulates her position as a woman, and clearly identifies that she is to be primarily silent, submissive, and of "placid countenance".<sup>14</sup> She exemplifies the expectations placed upon the classical woman, and displays what it looks like to adhere to them. The dramatic setting can be seen as the means through which an ideal woman could be represented and a deviant woman could receive due consequence.

Aeschylus' depiction of Clytemnestra illustrates a woman's refusal to adhere to cultural norms and the consequences that a woman must receive upon her deviation from such. Clytemnestra's role as the wife of Argos' King, Agamemnon, elevates her to a position

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<sup>13</sup> Richard P. Martin: Introduction to Richmond Lattimore's *Iliad* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 18-23.

<sup>14</sup> Euripides, *The Trojan Women*, trans. Gilbert Murray (Auckland: The Floating Press, 2009), 646-56:

Andromache is given as the picture of an ideal woman in saying: Whatever is wise for women, this I toiled at in Hector's house. First of all, whether or not women are blamed, it gives you a bad name if you do not remain at home: so I abandoned any desire to venture out, and stayed in the house. Within those walls I did not import any clever female talk; no, I had a natural teacher, my own good sense, and that was enough. I kept my tongue silent, I greeted my husband with a placid countenance; I knew where it was right for me to overcome my husband, and where it was right for me to yield victory to him.

different than that of an average citizen wife. The expectation, therefore, differs from that of the citizen wife. These expectations are fulfilled at the onset of the play, *Agamemnon*. Clytemnestra is ruling in her husband's stead while he fights in the Trojan War. Inasmuch as she is adapting to cultural expectations she is valued, esteemed, and respected, as is expected if the adherence to norms is linked to the way the woman is both understood and received. At this point, the chorus addresses her by saying, "I have come out of respect for your power, Clytemnestra; for it is/ right to honour the lady of a ruler, when the man leaves his/ throne empty."<sup>15</sup> It is not only right that she is honoured for taking the position, but she is respected because she has done so. This dynamic quickly changes, as Clytemnestra scorns the subjugated position women are normally given, and has ambitious desire to retain power. She says to the chorus:

You test me like a witless woman, but I speak with a fearless heart to those who know; and whether you yourself wish to approve or to blame me, it's all the same!<sup>16</sup>

She does not wish to hold the station of a "witless woman" but would prefer to be in the powerful, dominant position of a man--of her husband in particular. As she plots to murder Agamemnon in order to avenge the sacrifice he made of their daughter, she also aspires to take the throne and rule with her lover "in...twin mastery of [the] house."<sup>17</sup> She does not wish to be subjugated again. In removing the King from his position, Clytemnestra consequently alters the power relation between men and women, and that between King and country. She does not simply threaten the pinnacle of

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<sup>15</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, trans. Christopher Collard, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 258-260.

<sup>16</sup> *Ag.* 1401-1403.

<sup>17</sup> *Ag.* 1672.



masculine dominance, but destroys it. In response to such abhorrent cultural deviance the chorus rises up against her, and rebukes all of womankind in reprimand of her actions. They call woman an “evil thing” and declare Clytemnestra the object of the “people’s curse.”<sup>18</sup>

The ultimate rejection and exclusion of Clytemnestra from society, in response to her deviance is seen in Aeschylus’ *Libation Bearers*, which tells of Clytemnestra’s murder at the hands of her son Orestes. He himself hurls the worst insults at her. He says:

A woman who contrived this hateful thing against a husband whose children she had carried heavy in her womb--they were dear to her for a while, but now a bad enemy, as she shows--what do you think of her? If she had been born a sea-snake or a viper, would she have caused more putrefaction by her mere touch, in one she had not bitten, thanks to her audacity and lawless spirit? I wish for no such mate to share my house!

May the gods kill me first, and childless!<sup>19</sup>

He exacts retribution for his father’s murder while also removing Clytemnestra from the role that she assumed masculine dominance to obtain. By deviating from the norm, she constructed the grounds on which she needed to be expelled from her society. Orestes dramatically fulfilled the exclusion of his mother from the realm in which she refused to operate.

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<sup>18</sup> Ag. 1406-1409:

The chorus states:

What evil thing, woman,  
grown in the earth to eat,  
or to drink from a source in the flow of the sea,  
did you taste to perform this rite of death, incurring the people’s spoken  
curse?

<sup>19</sup>Aeschylus, *Libation Bearers*, trans. Christopher Collard (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 991-1005.

The same principle is not exclusively segregated to classical literature; examining the dynamic of the Victorian Era, it becomes clear that women are expected to adhere to cultural norms and are pictured in literature as being expelled when they cannot. As in Classical Greece, the Victorian Era was characterized by patriarchal dominance. This resulted in a phenomenon where the "Victorian ideology of gender rested on the belief that women were both physically and intellectually the inferior sex."<sup>20</sup> Despite the fact that during this time there was movement toward women's freedom--such as women's suffrage and women's property rights--"complete gender equality was by no means achieved. Rather, the traditional notion of inequality gave way to the mildly reformed view of 'equal but different'. As professional, educational and legal rights improved, male autonomy weakened, but female dependency remained."<sup>21</sup> The dependency of women upon men was seen in the atmosphere surrounding marriage, wherein it was not a romantic venture done for the love of a person, but was made because of political, social, or moral implications. The woman went through this process because it was what was culturally expected of her at the time, and she did not have the means by which to control her own wealth or status without a husband. She was inextricably linked to his finances, ventures, and vocation, therefore being almost entirely dependant upon him. Turkish scholar, Askin Haluk Yildirim, explores the way that the cultural expectations and gender ideology of women in the Victorian era are reflected throughout Victorian literature. He draws upon the work of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to demonstrate how the ideal of a domestic

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<sup>20</sup> Askin Haluk Yildirim, "The Woman Question and The Victorian Literature on Gender," *Ekev Academic Review* 52, no. 16 (2012): 46. doi: 13016229.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

woman was central to their identity; he explains that even the female who desired to break free of the cultural expectations and subjugations put upon her, struggled with the taboo of not adhering to such a role and position.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, Andromache's ideal is upheld throughout the centuries, and is carried through into Victorian literature; the domestic woman is depicted as being the most widely accepted. Though enabled to have more freedom in some aspects, it becomes evident that the Victorian woman was still subjugated, just as the classical woman was, and was expected to follow certain cultural constraints.

The character of Irene Adler operates in the realm of the Victorian woman; she is expected to be innocent, defenseless, and entirely dependant upon a man to save her. These characteristics are reflected in the other women of Conan Doyle's collection of *Sherlock Holmes* mysteries. In "the Adventure of the Speckled Band," Helen Stoner comes to seek the advice of Sherlock Holmes because she is in danger from her stepfather. When she pleads for his help she says:

Oh, sir, do you not think that you could help me, too, and at least throw a little light through the dense darkness which surrounds me? At present it is out of my power to reward you for your services, but in a month or six weeks I

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 51.

Askin Haluk Yildirim states that:

The Victorian gender stratification which rests on the belief that the virtuous women should not move beyond the boundaries of domestic sphere is questioned by [Elizabeth Barrett] Browning, who equips Aurora with both the skills to pursue a career and the virtues to be an ideal wife. On the other hand, in her struggle, Aurora's description of herself with masculine terms demonstrates the rigidity of Victorian gender codes that penetrates into the souls and minds of even feminine figures seeking emancipation.

shall be married, with the control of my own income, and then at least you shall not find me ungrateful.<sup>23</sup>

She exhibits terror at the prospect of danger from her stepfather, but is unable to do anything about it herself. She seeks the advice of Sherlock Holmes, but is unable to reward him until she has married. As such, Helen Stoner falls within the realm of the typical woman of the Victorian Era. She is unable to defend herself and already exhibits dependency upon the husband she has not yet married. Jasmine Hill, in her article "Ordering the Sensational: Sherlock Holmes and the Female Gothic", argues that Sherlock Holmes serves as a conduit through which there is made "the correct exchange of women. He [Sherlock Holmes] overcomes the father's incestuous control of [the characters] Alice Rucastle and Helen Stoner, and he delivers Helen Stoner and Violet Smith to their prospective husbands."<sup>24</sup> The recurring plot then becomes a cultural construct wherein Sherlock Holmes rescues women from the hands of their oppressors and they are dependent upon him, a man; they become dependant on their husbands for everything thereafter. These dependant women are protected and are well received within the literature, but only inasmuch as they continue to rely on the men. In turning to Holmes they are assuming the role they are expected to. The readers anticipate that he will reinforce the cultural expectations to which they have grown accustomed and he does just that. Irene Adler is the one exception.

Irene Adler is the promiscuous character who is found blackmailing the King of Bohemia with photos of their

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<sup>23</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Adventure of the Speckled Band," in *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories* (New York: Bantam Classic, 2003), 399.

<sup>24</sup> Jasmine Hill, "Ordering the Sensational: Sherlock Holmes and the Female Gothic," *Biography Reference* 28, no. 3 (1991): 300, doi:00393789.

past indiscretion. She is a strong, independent woman that has “a soul of steel. She has the face of the most beautiful of women, and the mind of the most resolute of men.”<sup>25</sup> She not only exists as a deviation from the culturally subjugated women by refusing to go to Sherlock Holmes for help, but she is the one person to outwit Sherlock Holmes as he investigates her. In her letter to him at the end of “a Scandal in Bohemia,” it is easy to see her intellect and her capacity to take care of herself. She outlines how she had begun to see through Holmes’ scheme, and then explains how she plans to keep the photograph “only to safeguard [herself], and to preserve a weapon which will always secure [her] from any steps which [the King] might take in the future.”<sup>26</sup> This demonstrates her ability to operate outside of the sphere of male dominance, and in this she deviates not only from the world of Victorian literature, but the world of *Sherlock Holmes* as well. She does not need protection from any man, not even Sherlock Holmes, to whom every woman runs when in need. In this, perhaps, Irene Adler poses the greatest threat to the Victorian hero; a woman who does not need a man. In this construct, if the women do not depend upon the men, what sphere does he have to exert his dominance?

Irene Adler’s deviation from the norm is clear: she is too intelligent, too independent, and too crafty to be an accepted Victorian woman. Despite this, she seems to be favourably received within the world of *Sherlock Holmes*. The King of Bohemia concedes that she is such a woman, and would have been a great queen, if only she was of higher status; Sherlock Holmes regards her under the “honourable title of *the* woman.”<sup>27</sup> This would seem to be

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<sup>25</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, “A Scandal in Bohemia,” in *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories* (New York: Bantam Classic, 2003), 247-248.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 260, 263.

in contrast to the way in which the deviant women in classical literature were rejected from the folds of society, until one examines Irene Adler's ability to appear to adhere to the norm:

[she] is the daintiest thing under a bonnet on this planet...She lives quietly, sings at concerts, drives out at five every day, and returns at seven sharp for dinner. Seldom goes out at other times, except when she sings. Has only one male visitor, but a good deal of him.<sup>28</sup> This visitor ends up being the man she marries, Mr. Godfrey Norton. For all intents and purposes, Irene Adler appears to follow the constraints the society puts upon her. She seems to be operating within the domestic realm, she has a husband on whom she can appear to depend, and she can portray herself as being as dainty as a woman despite also being as resolute as a man. She does still suffer some consequences for her deviance, but does not fall under the same hammer as does the character of Clytemnestra. Irene is driven from her home in London in order to avoid the retaliation of the King of Bohemia and is never considered to be a woman of high enough standing for him. She is excluded from the society to which she refuses to adhere, but she does not suffer fatal consequences. This is precisely because of her ability to portray the cultural characteristics she knows she should exhibit. In doing so she preserves the role of the men, and therefore, does not need to be removed.

Throughout the literature of the Classical and Victorian age, it is evident that the cultural acceptance of women is based upon their ability to adhere, or appear to adhere, to the cultural norms of the society. Literature is rife with implications suggesting that those who are unable to adhere to the norms will be shunned, rejected, and removed from the culture to which they do not belong.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 250.

Lysistrata is rejected when she seizes the Acropolis and denies the men of her society the sex to which they feel entitled. This initial rejection is reversed when it becomes apparent that Lysistrata desires to return to the cultural norms. Clytemnestra is killed when she dominates and murders the rightful ruler of Argos, and is effectively removed from the culture whose gender constraints she refuses to acknowledge. Irene Adler is accepted, and respected because of her ability to operate within her culture inasmuch as she appears to adhere to the norms of it. Those who are not willing to be subjugated become a threat and must be nullified inasmuch as they are eliminated or expelled from the culture. In this way, despite growing acceptance of women throughout Classical and Victorian literature, the implications that a woman must be subjected and adhere to cultural constraints are never truly abandoned. The acceptance of women can only be achieved through adherence to and subjugation by the cultural reality of their society.

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