Humanism, the Reformation and the Debate over the Nature of Women in the Elizabethan and Jacobean Periods

Introduction: There was no Renaissance for women, at least not in the Renaissance,” wrote the twentieth century feminist critic J. Kelly Gadol (1977: 137-64). While I agree with this opinion about the place that women occupied in the public sphere, I can only qualify it in terms of the debate that arose as a consequence of the Renaissance. I shall argue that the Renaissance is primarily a debate about the nature, place and function of man in this critical period of human history. The Renaissance is primarily marked with what later came to be called humanism. The humanist philosophy is centred on man, but it did not specifically address man as a gender category, man or woman, but man in the generic sense of the word, even if the reference to woman and man is hierarchized. In what follows, I shall argue that the Renaissance debate about man also involved directly and indirectly the discussion about the nature, the place and the function of women. As it can be expected, the debate on women and power relations between men and women is not one-directional, it involved contradictory views about what women are and what their place in the family and society should be. I shall illustrate this contradictory debate with reference to two major figures of the Renaissance. Before embarking on any details about this controversial debate, an acknowledgement of the concept of the Renaissance and Renaissance Humanism is necessary. The Renaissance is one of the greatest periods of growth and development in Western Europe. It stretches from the early fourteenth to the late seventeenth century, and is considered as the period of transition between the Middle Ages and the Modern Era. The term Renaissance literally means “rebirth”, and is conventionally held to have been characterized by a surge of interest in classical learning and values. It was the revival, the recovery of antique Greek and Roman cultures with
emphasis on the individual as subject and no more as the object of God’s ordained order; the latter being severely put into question. It is widely agreed that the Renaissance movement emerged in Italy, in the city of Florence, and then it spread to the rest of the European continent reaching the British shores by the end of the fifteenth century. The artistic development is the most outstanding aspect of the movement, though undeniable social and political improvements were inspired by the Renaissance. The latter cannot be referred to, as a whole phenomenon, to any one cause or circumstance, nor can it be limited within the field of any one department of human knowledge. It is a wide revolution concerned with a wide range of interests, including architecture, painting and sculpture. The Renaissance witnessed the discovery and exploration of new continents, the adoption of the Copernican system of astronomy, the decline of the feudal system and new inventions such as paper, printing, the compass and gunpowder. The European scholars became subsequently more interested in studying the world around them. Their art became truer to life as they began to explore new lands. The renaissance was primarily the time of the revival of classical learning and wisdom after a long period of cultural decline and stagnation (Gresh, 2003: 45). Major advances, in different fields occurred during this period. Both social stratification and prevailing order were to be replaced. At all levels, things were never going to be the same. At all events the Renaissance was heralded through the recovery by Italian scholars of Greek and Roman classical literature. When the movement began, the civilization of Greece and Rome had long been exerting partial influence, not only upon Italy, but on other parts of mediaeval Europe as well (Blaynley, 1957: 54). When the movement began, the civilizations of Greece and Rome had long been exerting partial influence, not only upon Italy, but on other parts of mediaeval Europe as well. However, in Italy especially, as the wave of “barbarism” had passed, the people began to feel a returning consciousness of their culture and a desire to revive it. To Italians, the Latin language was easy, and their country abounded in documents and monumental records which symbolized past greatness. It would be difficult to point to one factor that singularly led to the emergence of the Renaissance movement. The Crusades and the recapture of Jerusalem was one
leading factor. The crusaders brought back lost works from the Roman Empire and opened trade with the Middle East. Arab scholars had preserved the writings of the ancient Greeks in their libraries, and when the Italian cities of Verona, Napoli or Genoa traded with the Arabs, ideas were exchanged along with goods. These ideas, preserved from the past, served as the basis of the Renaissance. This increase in trade and abundance in wealth resulted in the focusing on the arts. The Bubonic Plague was another factor leading to the decline of papal supremacy. The outbreak led people to question the church and set the stage for massive social, political, economic and philosophical change (Blayney, 1957: 23). In fact, the miraculous ability of spiritual healing failed to fulfill its promises, since one third of the English population passed away. Survivors of the plague were disillusioned by the church’s inability to explain or deal with the ravaging Black Death. It would be difficult to give a single definite answer to the question what is Renaissance. For the scientists it is the discovery of the solar system by Copernicus and Galileo, the anatomy of Vesalius, and Harvey’s theory of circulation of blood. The origination of a truly scientific method is the point which interests them most in the Renaissance. The political historian would answer the question in another way. For him it is the extinction of feudalism, the development and the growth of monarchy, and the limitation of ecclesiastical authority. It is the rising of a sense of popular freedom which exploded in a social revolution. For thinkers it deals with philosophy, and discovery of manuscripts, that passion for antiquity, that progress in philology and criticism, which led to the correct knowledge of the classics, to a fresh taste in poetry, to new systems of thought, to more accurate analysis, and finally to the emancipation of the conscience. It follows that, the Renaissance was meant to revalorize the individual and elevate him to “l’uomo universale”, the universal man. In The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897) clearly recognized that the beginnings of modern individualism lay as far back as the fourteenth century, the time of Dante and Petrarck. It was, he argued, the time that witnessed the birth of the modern spirit—with its critical attitude, its faith in objective and organized knowledge and its self-assertiveness. In this respect, he writes what follows: In the Middle Ages […]
human consciousness lay half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith […]. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an objective treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible. The subjective side, at the same time asserting itself with corresponding emphasis; man became the spiritual individual and recognized himself as such. (Qted in Burckhardt, 1958: 60) In the light of the quotation above, I can argue that man in the Middle Ages was conscious of himself only as a member of some general category – race, family, gender. The triumph over darkness however, turned him to the depiction of the inward resources of his own nature, and thus to the improvement of his knowledge which was once confined within narrow limits. It was left to the humanists to raise this kind of knowledge. The return to secularity was therefore, meant to deny both to the Pope and the church any divine claims to authority. It is however, important to underline that it was not an anti-Christian movement, but one which had at stake the limitation of the temporal power of the papacy with a widespread condemnation the notorious abuses in the medieval church. Therefore, the un-chastity of the supposedly celibate clergy, the luxury and extravagance of the monasteries and the dubious financial dealings of the papacy such as the sale of indulgencies were to be attacked. The Renaissance stimulating ideas, current in Italy, spread to other areas and were used to criticize the contemporary societies all over Europe. Combined with indigenous developments, they produced other European Renaissances, among which the English one. Great thinkers and philosophers, religious and secular, agitated for reform. This resulted in various popular uprisings that urged towards reforming the established order; to move away from monarchical and papal absolutism, towards a greater sense of social and religious independence. By the sixteenth century the whole of Europe was ablaze with fervour of reform, and England was no exception. Sixteenth century Britain’s civil and ecclesiastical histories are so closely related, that it would be difficult if not impossible to separate them, so as to state where either of them starts or ends. Tudor England (1448-1603) was a society in turmoil, both religious and political. Social upheaval and religious strife dominated English public life. The Renaissance movement had finally reached the
remote island, and the English phase of reform was now under way. During the Renaissance the English society was transformed into a society increasingly urban, commercial, and individualistic. People’s curiosity overcame their fear and many people started to venture out and explore. Literacy spread out as new schools and colleges became more and more common. Commonly called Elizabethan England, the period is considered as the Golden era of the English history. Under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, the English nation witnessed the flourishing of the arts. The era saw the emergence of outstanding figures of the English and the world’s literature. Undisputed poets and dramatists such as Edmund Spencer, John Milton, Christopher Marlow or William Shakespeare produced amazingly timeless pieces of works. Humanism was the intellectual movement of the Renaissance. The movement had placed human beings once more in the centre of life’s stage and infused thought and art with humanistic values. This constituted the premises of a social revolt that would result in the English Reformation and the establishment of the Anglican Church. Humanist theory would prove of being of great benefit for the feminist cause. In this research paper I shall argue that English feminism had its roots in Renaissance humanism. Renaissance socio-ideological context constituted a fertile ground to the emergence and the propagation of revolutionary ideas as concerns women’s conditions. I shall demonstrate that there was a theological debate between Humanist and Protestant reformers’ over the issue of women. In fact, both Humanist scholars and Reformers showed interest and deep sympathy towards women. Protestant reformers and Humanist scholars, as they sharply criticized church practices and the dogmas of scripture, inevitably rejected God’s gender stratification, and therefore women’s attributed place, and thus shed light on women’s conditions as never before. The different views on education of women and the place they should held within the marriage institution, led to a clash between Humanists’ and Reformers. Whereas the former promoted education for all, including women, along with perfect eloquence, some Reformers focused on the virtue of silence and on full submission as essential to women. In her Half Humankind: Texts of Controversy about Women, Mc Manus argues that the debate over women’s worth has proved a staple
during the English Renaissance among people of the middle class: “Women provided the English Renaissance with prolific topic for attack and defence” (M.C. Manus 4). This debate, around the issue of women, would result in the feminist movement of the coming century. Before dealing with the time’s theological debate, let us have an overview on the social context of Renaissance England. The intellectual movement of the Renaissance was Humanism, and Humanist philosophy became quite popular during this period in England. This movement which originated with the study of classical culture and a group of subjects known as the humanities is an approach to life based on humanity and reason; the classics contained the lessons needed to reach high level of morality. Humanism is a “human centred” philosophy which relies on reason and empirical evidence to oppose the supernatural dogmas of scripture. It is a naturalistic view encompassing atheism and agnosticism as a reaction to theistic claims (Kurtz, 1983:45). The universe does not need a divine power outside itself to have value. Humanists asserted first and above all “the genuine of man”. Their aim was to revive and ancient Greco-Roman ideal, the Uomo Universal; a man able to behave honourably and virtuously thanks to his ability of thinking (Ibid.). Humanism believes in human natural goodness, in individuals’ endowment with moral value, and advocates their rights and freedom. Humanist advocates conceived society as based on cooperation and mutual respect. People are able to find solutions to their problems by their own means, gaining inspiration from the art and culture of the surrounding world, in the aim of providing quality of life and improvement (Olin, 1994: 34). Therefore, they wrote extensively in praise of the ability of the human mind, asserting that education alone could lead to such a status. In fact, education is a central element of the Humanist philosophy. Humanist theory would shape the modern idea of the “self”. In fact, individualism or the discovery of man as an entity is the most important development and achievement of the Renaissance (17). Renaissance Humanists were concerned with the idea of “self-knowledge”; man started to become aware of his existence as an individual, no more as belonging to a certain social category or to a given group (18). Renaissance Humanist reformers such as Desiderius Erasmus and Thomas More, optimistically, assumed
for themselves the ability to remedy the ills of the age, with acquaintance with the cultures of the past. They advocated that individuals’ thoughts should no longer be of abstract speculation or rely on absolute Christian thinking, but rather on observation and reasoning. In fact, the church became incapable of providing spiritual leadership and direction for the rapidly changing society and the newly growing merchant class. Feudal ties were broken and the new perspective emerged thanks to the Renaissance. They relied on education as a means of promoting one’s abilities, and, for the first time, spoke about women’s education. This constituted a great revolution in itself since never before women had been associated with any cognitive abilities, women were considered as inherently inferior to men. Humanist reformers defied the might of the church and of the Empire for the sake of a personal, direct relation to God. In fact, people were troubled by the anxieties of being constantly under the burden of guilt, and the eminent punishment of a stern judge. Their conscience was exhausted and calloused by restlessness and fear. Church absoluteness extended beyond all human comprehension. It was bound to neither ethic, nor logic and was required to be unquestionably accepted, believed and obeyed. It was widely agreed that only “full submission accompanied by the active love of God wipes out sins” (Blayney, 1957: 135), though it offered no consolation for a soul in distress. For the sake of freedom of religious belief and freedom of conscience, Humanist thinkers sought to find out the real experience which alone could vouchsafe peace of mind (Ibid). At first humanists’ talents were hired to reanimate the church and to create an image of the popes as enlightened modern rulers of the church; however collaboration proved impossible (Gresh, 2003: 54). Humanists involved their own views on theology, and criticized important church doctrines and institutions. Those who supported Plato’s philosophy seemed in danger of becoming pagans themselves (Ibid.). Humanist ideals were best expressed in the works of Desiderius Erasmus. Desiderius Erasmus (1469-1536) was a Dutch humanist. Strongly critical of papal influence in secular life and church abuses, he was determined to reform it from within. He revolted against the European society and absolutism of the monarchy. One must not be mistaken; Erasmus was a Christian humanist who wanted to reform the church and did not
want it to be removed. He asserted that he was not attacking church institutions and that he had no enmity toward churchmen. His movement was for pure scholarship with the aim of reform. His work, *In Praise of Folly* (1509), is a satirical attack on the traditions of the European society, the Catholic Church and popular superstitions. For him, “The chief evil of the day was formalism, going through the motion of traditions, without understanding their basis” (Olin, 1994: 43). Erasmus advocated the doctrine of free will as opposed to that of predestination; Individuals are free agents able to take decisions without the constraint of religious determinism. As a substitute he advocated Libertarianism, the freedom of choice. His Gospel Preacher 1516 is one of the most notable essays of the Reformation. He favoured flexibility and condemned over rigid belief systems. He bitterly attacked the abuses of power. His destructive criticisms were widely directed to the monarchs since the latter had the power in hand. One recurrent theme in this works was that: “while good kings are a theoretical possibility, tyrants are an ever present danger” (Olin, 1994: 57). His *Christian Prince* 1516, though it was dedicated to the sixteenth-years-old king Charles of Spain of whom he was councillor, the work was written in England and is therefore part of the English humanist literature. He exposes the “maleducation” of the future kings; “the process by which a young prince is corrupted and brought up to be a potential tyrant” (Ibid.). The educational ideals that had been formulated in Italy had been taken up, augmented and spread by Erasmus. As an effective champion of learning on a large scale, his revolutionary views on education came to be adopted in countries of Northern Europe (Major, 1923:59). In her article *women’s history in transition* Nathalie Zenon Davis asserts that Desiderius Erasmus countered the misogynist underpinnings of male thinking about women: “He was one of the most important champions of women’s rights in his century” (Nathalie Zenon Davis 77).

He was one of the few men in his time to challenge the gender dichotomies of the western culture which linked “masculinity to rationality” and “feminity to illogic and sensuality” (Ibid). There is, further, no reference to be found in his writings to the physiological nonsense, so prevalent at the time, that women were inferior by nature to men (Olin, 1994: 56). In fact, interest
in the defence of womankind was stimulated by humanist educational theory (Johnson, 1994: 24). Educational programs were vigorously set up at the turn of the sixteenth century, supported by Humanist scholars such as Roger Ascham or Thomas More. Their pedagogical manuals did not only offer a complete program of humanistic education, but also an evocation of their ideals towards which this education should lead to (Ibid). Erasmus’ masterpiece was dedicated to his close friend and collaborator Sir Thomas More, as the following quotation suggests: “I thought it more pertinent to employ my thoughts in calling to remembrance several of those highly learned, as well as smartly ingenious friends, among whom you dear Sir were represented an the chief” (Erasmus, Holbein, 1876: 14).

Thomas More (1478-1535) was another great Humanist writer, and political philosopher of the Reformation. Walking along the lines advocates by Erasmus and sharing the latter’s ideas; Thomas More also criticized the European society and defended women. His works, Utopia is considered among the masterpieces of the period. Utopia was a work Inspired by Plato’s Republic. More attacks and severely criticizes England as well as well the neighbouring European countries. Then he turns to describe an ideal state submitted to democracy. He shows hints of the concept of the welfare state; the state, the monarchy, should be a great deal more involved in social concerns of its subjects, such as education and health. He attacks the Christian most cherished beliefs and practices, and advocates religious toleration. Polytheists and even atheist were tolerated.

A. Sir Thomas More’s Ideas on Women’s Education


In her The Invention of the Renaissance woman: The Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and the Thought of Italy and England (1992), Pamela Joseph Benson argues that Thomas More was a “pro-feminist” educator (Joseph-Benson, 1992: 98). Though Thomas More did not publish his theories on
education, *The Instruction of a Christian Woman*, by Juan Luis Vives have been assumed to speak for Sir Thomas More (Ibid.). His ideas on women’s education can also be found in his Latin epigram of choosing a wife, published in 1517, and in some of his correspondences. The Latin epigram was the only description of More’s female ideal available to the public in his life time in a published form. He gives an extra ordinary prominence to the role of education in making good wives, and advocates women eloquence as opposed to Protestants’ virtue of silence (Olin, 1994:78). Female eloquence, which was potentially so dangerous a skill that many Humanists argued for the need to prevent it acquisition, was presented entirely positively by Thomas More (Ibid.). The wife’s intellectual autonomy, which she gains through her education, and her willingness to use her wisdom to relieve her husband’s cares are the essential elements of his idealized conception of domestic life. In his advisory texts to men on how to choose a wife, he makes the latter a product of Humanist imagination as overwhelmingly educated and perfectly eloquent. He asserts that women’s literary activity does not constitute a threat to domestic harmony, as argued by most of the contemporary Protestant advocates, but is rather an occasion of pride from the part of father and husband. Educated women must be seen as part of the society, not as a threat to social order (Olin, 1994:65). Thomas More challenges the reader to radically revise the notion of the wife, as traditionally relegated to silence in marriage by Protestant reformers, and the idea that her speech was naturally bad. He asserts that silence does not mean obedience, but rather ignorance. Wife’s speech does not constitute rebellion against the husband’s rightful authority, but rather a sign of her ability of thinking and understanding. Wife described by Thomas More is free to speak her understanding based on her education. In all the works wherein he deals with women’s education, Thomas More “pits the private world of learned women against society, instead of praising her for conformity to society’s values” (Horvat, 2002 V. 13 N° 104). By “society’s values” it can be understood that More referred to the standards of the female ideal and the model wife described by Protestant reformers, so prevalent at the time. As Thomas More formulated his ideas about education, he put them into practice in his household, which consisted mainly of girls. He had great
respect for women's intelligence and encouraged his children's
tutor not to differentiate between them on the basis of sex. The
results of his efforts with his daughters and wards were so
impressive that many of his contemporaries who followed his
example and educated their daughters cited his success as
justification for their enterprise, and the names of the young
women who were educated under his auspices became a fixed
part of lists of famous women not only in England, but abroad
(Ibid.).

Thomas More praises education for providing women with
spiritual and moral autonomy, that is, the ability to know what is
right, rather than with the reinforcement of the outward form of
chastity; indeed, he never speaks of chastity. Through More's
system of education a woman achieves a capacity for moral
judgment and is freed from the bondage to male authority that
characterizes woman's role in conventional marriage (Joseph-
Benson, 1992:157). He, however, did not reject marriage
institution as he argues because of her education, the wife’s
company provides for the husband not only a retreat
from the cares of the world, as the company of any wife might,
but a solution to those cares through the husbands
submission to her wise perspective on them. (Olin,
1994: 98) The ability to judge right from wrong frees women to
be responsible for their own morals rather than committing them
to male strictures on their conduct. Through education women
have been made morally responsible members of society. And
although the result of this education will be virtue, Thomas More
does not subject this virtue to public scrutiny, or value it for its
usefulness to society, as did utilitarian Protestants; he rather
emphasized it to its value to the individual.

Thomas Elyot was a supporter of the humanist ideas
concerning the education of women. Writing in support of
learned women, he published The Defence of Good Women
1540. In this writing he supported Thomas More and other
humanist authors’ ideals of educated wives who would be able to
provide intellectual companionship to their husbands and proper
education to their children (Kenney, 1986: 67). Roger Ascham
was another Humanist that preached for the education of women.
The Schoolmaster (1570) is Ascham’s best known book. The
work presents an effective method of teaching Latin, but its
larger concerns are with the psychology of learning, the education of the whole person, and the ideal moral and intellectual that education should modal. Roger Ascham was the educator of Queen Elizabeth I. It comes obvious that, as already stated, Humanist educational theory stimulated reform in favour of women’s defence, through the praise of individual abilities. Besides the praise of the individual, it is the use of this term in a generic sense; without any reference to gender categories or any differentiation on the basis of sex, which would prove praiseworthy to the feminist cause. As Pauline Johnson explains in her *Feminism as Radical Humanism* (1994) that “feminism is humanism in a straightforward sense since the feminist message is the assertion that women must be considered first and foremost as human beings” (Johnson, 1994: 01).

**Protestant Reformers**

Humanist libertine spirit led to the Protestant reform. Church influence weakened and papal authority became increasingly challenged as critics became more outspoken and numerous. The Church’s authority and women’s attributed places were also being challenged by popular heretical reformers, the Protestants. The latter were inspired by humanists’ scepticism that questioned past beliefs and traditions as they found a paved way to walk on. However, divergences emerged among Protestant reformers. In fact, Protestants criticism of Church institution proved to be harsher, and more radical. Whereas some reformers supported the humanist theory of the educated wife, others held the belief that submission, silence, and total obedience constituted the only virtues the wife, and therefore women, ought to acquire. It needs to be stated that the origins of the English Reformation can be traced to the writings of John Wycliffe, an English theologian of the fourteenth century. Wycliffe is recognized as the father of Protestantism and as “the morning star” of Reformation (Maslin Hulme, 1915:76). He was the very first rebel against ecclesiastical influence in common life. His translated version of the bible, into vernacular English, was meant to make the Christian religion more intelligible by more people, and to put an end to intermediary between God and his worshipers.

In fact, the church had incurred a tremendous amount of bad feelings over the years and became widely criticized. Feelings
against churchmen and church’s practices ran high. People got tired of the ties imposed by the Roman Catholic Church and its abuses such as selling indulgences to diminish the sentence a person were unquestionably to spend in hell, no matter how pious she or he were. Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century were also inspired by Martin Luther’s ideas; a German theologian who declared his intolerance to Roman church’s corruption and its abuses.

Though it gave voice to a popular desire to move away from religious ties, The English Reformation was more a matter of business than of faith. It was driven by financial and personal reasons. In fact, over the course of his reign, King Henry managed to turn the Crown’s bulging treasury into a gaping black-hole of debt. His life style and his desire for military glory had left him in a precarious financial position. He was in a sharp need of money, and the church had lots of it. Furthermore, the king was in love with one of the queen’s ladies in waiting. Facing Pope’s refusal to grant him the right to divorce from Catherine of Aragon, his brother’s widow and present wife, Henry divorced from the church instead. Therefore, Reformation was more a personal and a political move rather than a doctrinal split.

Reformation was sealed through the Act of Supremacy (1534). King Henry assumed for himself the mantle of ecclesiastical authority. His purpose was to firmly establish himself as the official head of the Church of England, supplanting the power of the catholic pope in Rome, and firmly establishing the Anglican Church of England.

B. Protestants Views on Education and Marriage

Protestant spirit had dominated the outlook of Western civilization since the 1500’s. It has been transfused, like lifeblood, into the economic, social and political life, so it is natural then, that this revolution had strong influence on women. Dr Horvat, asserts that the role of women changed significantly after the Protestant Reformation (Horvat, Maslin Hulme, 1915: 34). Protestant thinking had altered God’s attributed roles for his creatures, men and women. The balance of nature, as God intended it, was being challenged by Protestant reformers, rebelling against God’s will (Ibid.). Here are some of the roles of women, according to the founders of Protestantism.
John Calvin

In his *Is Education Necessary?* Dr Samuel Blumenfeld asserts that the root of education for the common person goes back to the Reformation, and especially, to John Calvin: “When it came to the concept of education for the common man, all roads led to Calvin” (Blumenfeld). Dr Loraine Boettner wrote in her *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*: “Wherever Calvinism has gone, it has carried the school with it and has given a powerful impulse to popular education. In fact its very existence is tied up with the education of people” (Boettner, ). Calvin promoted education for everyone. He emphasized the importance of education having moral relevance. Calvin also was insistent that it was the parents’ responsibility to educate their children. Therefore, the control of education should remain with the parents. For him, the purpose of education is to know God and to glorify him. In Geneva, Calvin promoted education for everyone, without any gender based discrimination, and therefore, he promoted education for women. His Academy was the model for many of the early colleges and universities established by the Puritans and their successors in America.

Martin Luther’s Ideas on Marriage and Education

As a controversial case, though advocating the same ideology, John Calvin and Martin Luther held opposite views on the issue of gender. In fact, while Calvin promoted education and eloquence, along with the Ciceronian ideal of “honst man”, Luther saw silence as female’s sole virtue, and marriage as her true role.

In her *Luther on Women: A Source Book* (2003), Susan C. Karant-Nunn asserts that Martin Luther proclaimed himself as an authority on marriage, for he asserted that before him “Not one of the fathers wrote anything notable or particularly good concerning the married state” (Luther, Karant-Nunn, 2003:58). Martin Luther was a fervent advocate of the institution of marriage. Marriage is God’s ordained order to the humankind since he created Eve from and for Adam, as a suitable companion for purposes of marriage. Marriage is human beings’ predestination; it is godly salubrious norm, as God said: “It is not good that men should be alone. I will make him a helper who will be close to him” (*A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage, 1519:166*, Wiesner-Hanks, 2003: 89).
The reformer saw marriage as a way of promoting women’s dignity inside home, he, therefore, attacked the celibate life of the Catholic clergy and the nuns. He publicized his own marriage to show that a man could be a married, sexually active, and pious at the same time (Horvat, 2002 v13 no104). Celibacy could only lead to social disorder, since only marriage was the only institutions where a chaste life could be maintained. The Catholic Church had given high respect to unmarried women, the virgins. Because of their complete dedication to God, religious women, like religious men were considered necessary. Protestantism with a single blow cut down the various mediators, to whom the church and its adepts had recourse, including saints and priests. By closing convents, the religious vocation was no more of high status (Ibid.). Protestant utilitarianism dealt with everything in terms of usefulness, and all intermediaries were no more necessary. Therefore, marriage became women’s only social opportunity. The rejection of the celibate ideal of the Middle Ages was a great revolution. Luther literally transferred the praises and esteem that Christians had heaped upon the celibate monks and nuns, to marriage and the home (Wiesner-Hanks, 2003: 91). Marriage was submitted to hierarchy. A woman, as the bible said, should be governed by a man and no longer had any right to any vocation but marriage. She should be bound to the domestic sphere, as the following quotation shows: “Their (women’s) very physique is a sign from the creator that they ought to be domestic; they have narrow shoulders and large hips” (Luther, Wiesner-Hanks, and 2003: 59). The husband went out to engage in activities that would enable him to earn his dependant’s livelihood, while he delegated the domestic administration to his wife. Hierarchical structure of marriage stipulated full and absolute obedience of the wife to her husband, as both the Old and the New Testaments abound with examples of positive female behaviour, according to God’s commend to female believers (Karant-Nunn, 2003:64). Female obedience as it had to be total, it was ungoverned by any rules, since intermediary obedience such as the one owed to the Christ or to the priests was excluded by Protestantism. In fact, one of the rudiments of Protestantism was the absence of any intermediary between God and the worshiper (Maslin Hulme, 1915: 98). Therefore, as the Protestants sought a new point of authority,
apart from that of God and as a substitute to that of the intermediaries, they found it in an exaggerated authority of the husband and the father (Karant-Nunn, 2003:88). Obedience was seen as an essential virtue for women. Protestant fundamentalists stressed a kind of unthinking obedience, that when Sarah asked Abraham to expel Hagar, Protestant scholars saw that even this limited challenge to male authority, was not to serve as a model for other women (Ibid.). Marriage was primarily meant for procreation; to ensure the propagation of the human race, and of the species according to God’s plans for reproduction: “A Christian body must generate, multiply, man must unite with woman and woman with man” (Luther, Krant-Nunn, 2003: 76). In fact, marriage is the only way to get children, through the satisfaction of human sexual drive, since only companionship and offspring are sought. All others form of desire and lust are evil (Stubbes, 1583: ), and are therefore contrary to God’s commend. Sex was not to be enjoyed. Wife and husband are complementary, men handling the concerns of the public arena, and wives adhering to the home. Marriage was the only way to reach what Luther called “bridal-love”; the feeling that wife and husband exclusively share (Ibid.). The latter would sustain the couple through the tribulations of life. Protestantism permitted divorce and re-marriage on some well defined grounds, such as adultery, abandonment or impotence. This was a revolution; never before had women been allowed to divorce abusive husbands. But this supposedly protection from abuse created a new category of social marginal, divorced women. The latter suffered hardships; they had no way to earn a living, they had no husbands to be taken care of, and no social vocation. Protestant patriarchal power conflicted with protestant principle of equality. Whereas, Protestant reformers agreed on the attribution of the wife to the private sphere, some openly advocated women’s right to education. Though the latter was meant to glorify the Lord, it would inevitably awake women’s self-awareness of their rights, and would result in their demand to be entitled to the same rights as men. Therefore, while the first movement of the Protestant revolution would uphold a strict family structure with an exaggerated authority given to the father and the husband, the seeds of the revolt would eventually produce a different kind of family structure (Horvat, 2002, V 13 no 104). It would be the
feminist revolution that would demand absolute equality not only in matters of religion and private interpretation, but in every social institution including marriage.

C. Reflection of the Spirit of the Time in Literature

As already stated, the poetic revolution was the second stage of English humanism, and it was led by the outstanding literary figures of the time. Deviating from the religious play and the morality of the late Middle Ages, English playwrights explored new horizons. Whereas the works of Edmund Spencer and Philip Sidney well defined the spirit of the time, innovations were being introduced by William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlow. Their works are considered as striking examples of the close relation of literature to history. In the aim of creating a great national literature for England, equal to the classic epic poems of Virgil and Homer, famous authors such as Edmund Spencer and Philip Sidney, produced some of the greatest masterpieces of the English, and the world’s, literature.

Prominent Elizabethan writers wrote much like the model of Greek and Roman predecessors such as Virgil or Petrarch, mainly on themes of classical mythology. Edmund Spencer (1552-1599) was one of the greatest poets of the Elizabethan period. His *The Faerie Queen* (1590-1596), is celebrated as one of the greatest and most important works of the English verse, written in the historical and cultural context of Elizabethan England and the Protestant Reformation. Being referred to as a highly persuasive representation of Queen Elizabeth I, the work is an allegorical epic poem, much in the tradition of the Greek poets like Virgil. Critics agree to say that it is the most extensive and eloquent defence of a female monarch to be written in the Renaissance (Joseph-Benson, 2003:251). The work discusses the religious conflicts and national politics. Spencer lived in post-Reformation England which had recently replaced Roman Catholicism by Protestant Anglicanism, religious protest, was therefore, part of Spencer’s life. It is understood to be both a religious and political allegory concerning the domestic status of Elizabethan England (Ibid.). “Spencer illustrated in his verse the affinity between the authorship of the time and the public life of the nation” (W Hint, 1900: 40). Inspired by Aristotle’s conception of human virtues, the work celebrates chastity, friendship, and justice. Other prominent figures include Philip
Sidney, Walter Raleigh and William Bird. Humanism in the cultural life of the sixteenth century is almost nowhere as visible as in the field of drama. Being two of the most representative playwrights of their time, William Shakespeare’s and Christopher Marlow’s views on society were incorporated into their plays, as these views were so much part of their life and world. Renaissance culture and especially literature had appeared both as a standard and an issue of debate among known poets when it comes to matters and relations with women. Shakespeare is one of the most famous Elizabethans who wrote intensively on love and women. He used the beliefs expressed by Castiglione and placed them into his works.

Castiglione’s book of the courtier 1528 is at a high point of humanistic thought and antiquarian interest in Renaissance Italy. The work did not only describe a perfect courtier, he also moulded his female equivalent. He held high view of female mental ability which was to be balanced by their femininity. His ideal woman is someone highly educated, graceful, feminine, able, witty and charming, especially the kind of heroines Shakespeare created in his plays. The court lady was described in a way similar to that of the courtier; her areas of knowledge were to be very similar to his. She has the same virtues of mind as he, and her education is symmetrical with his. He saw culture as an accomplishment for noblewomen and men alike, used to develop the self (Kelly-Gadol, 1977:148). The writer spent a great deal of his book defending women and attacking the hypocrisy of men. His work was a valiant attempt to defend women and eliminate their inferiority.

D. Women’s Conditions in Renaissance/ Elizabethan England: The Obverse Side of the Picture

On reading the above summary of the humanists’ and reformers’ call for the education of women, one might wrongly imagine that Elizabethan and Jacobean England was indeed “a paradise for women (Rye B. William, 1865”). However, an investigation of another type of literature, comprising sermons, conduct books, homilies, and catechisms, suggests that not all was fine for women in Albion at the time. In this literature, the conception of the ideal woman was a silent, chaste, virtuous woman, whose sole function would be to provide a peaceful home for her family, and submit to the whims of her husband.
Women were to be “delicate creatures innocent of sexual desire by both nature and duty chaste” (Harrison, Dereseiwicz, 2007: 57). Women were brought up to become perfect householders and child bearers. Tudor women took great pride in being mothers. The results of this stereotypical depiction of women, was the dominance of this preconceived idea that would prevail during the coming decades. Renaissance writers who wanted to attack women found ample precedent in classical antiquity. Greek mythology reveals several elements of hostility towards women. Let’s take the example of misogynist Greek poet Hesiod in his work *Pandora*. The latter sees women as created to give men troubles and suffering, women seem to personify the quintessence of evil. Branded as an ideologue of sexism and patriarchy, Aristotle, too, asserted the inferiority of women. His works offered the most offensive and misogynist attack on women. Biologically women were infertile, unable to procreate without men’s help. Women are more emotional than men, and this accounts for their irrationality. At the social level, he described them as “apolitical beings” belonging solely to the private domain (Stone, 1990:71). The relation between husband and wife was by nature that of superior to inferior, or ruler to the ruled. The Romans were sexist too; Juvenal’s Sixth Satire constitutes a full scale attack on women. The work is a wide-ranging attack on marriage, as the following extracts may suggest: “Posthumous, are you really taking a wife? You used to be sane enough!!, what fury got into you? [...] why endure such bitch tyranny”. Wives are depicted as vulgar, lying, shameless, vicious oppressors.

Women’s exclusion from the public sphere and confinement to the home was supported by theology. The Bible provides an important source forth both women attackers and defenders, as it contains both examples of wicked and virtuous women. However, most of the Christian writings about women reflected the anti-feminine bias of the biblical story of Eve (Joseph-Benson, 1992:56). Single women were considered as a source of temptation; women not bound by matrimony offer an occasion to sin. Women were accused of infidelity and of inciting males’ lust. Women were considered as naturally inferior to men. They were considered as the weaker sex both in terms of physical strength and emotions. Branded as irrational, they were
considered as being incapable of rational thinking, and as being incapable of possessing this capacity, and therefore, in need of the constant presence of a male protector. It was an age in which women’s education caused deep anxieties, and it revolved exclusively around household management. Women’s education was to combine strict formation on Christian principles and rigorous training in domestic skills. All the professions were closed to them, except those gender discriminated jobs such as cooks or maids. It happened that if a craftsman died his widow could carry on his work, but did this constitute a sign of progress whatsoever? Marriage was the only social opportunity, especially after the reformation and the closing of monasteries. There were not many avenues open to single women, it is not surprising therefore, that most women married. Marriage was arranged and divorce did not exist; the contract lasted as long as the couple lived. Marriage was God’s ordained order, its links were so strong that in the New Testament the relationship between the Christ and the Church was described in the vocabulary of married persons. People married for purely domestic purposes; a man had to find a wife and she had to be taken care of. Spinsters suffered hardships since they had to work to support themselves. Being considered as males’ inferior did not mean idleness. Women had to perform hard manual work to support their husbands in farms. They had to milk the cows, sell the goods in the markets, perform household tasks, and take care of the children as well.

So the protestant-humanist gender rhetoric against the Catholic counter-reformers in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods strangely resembles the “Kitchen debate” between the United States and Russia in the twentieth century when the former wanted to show the superiority of its civilization by the comfortableness of American housewives in modernized kitchens. Some quotations from the anti-female satire of the time are in order at this point to show the observe side of the male portrayal of British women. For example, in Edward Gosnyhill’s satirical “rectification” of those lines of the Genesis which speak about the creation of Eve out of Adam’s rib: “For a dog ran away with the rib and ate it, forcing God to make woman out of the dog’s rib. This is why the woman, at her husband doth bark and bawl, as doth the cur, for nought al. (1985: 149)” Gosnylls tells
his contemporaries that the ideal woman is a silent one. It is the one who listens rather the one who “barks” like “cur” for nothing. In nearly similar terms, Thomas Becon urges women to the same observe of chastity, obedience and silence when he catechises in his *Workes* (1564) that they must obey “with the head, eies, tong, lippes, hands, feete, the shoulders, or with any other parts of the body. (Anthologized in Newman Karen, 1991:149)” Nearly thirty years later, Henry Smith, another British catechist, in his *A Preparative to Marriage* (1591), separates the chaste woman from the unchaste woman by saying that “the ornament of a woman is silence [because] the open mouth hath much uncleanness. (Ibid., p.149)” The major idea that emerges from the above quotes is that woman is a potentially polluting agent who needs man’s moral strictures to keep her chaste both in the home and outside of the home. So on the whole, Kathleene Davies is to the point when she qualifies the ideal image of the Elizabethan and Jacobean woman constructed by other writers on the basis of the documents I have already discussed above. In this respect, she claims that the purposes of marriage, [...] the relationship between husband and wife in all its behavioural aspects – choice of partner, dominance of husband, mutual affection and respect, sexual activity and sharing of work, indicate that Puritan Conduct books do not show any change to domesticity and affection as ideals of marriage. There was nothing new in such ideals. (1981: 78) The humanist literature also makes too much of the case of the necessity for noble women to have an education that one is prone to construct the image of an “open” Elizabethan and Jacobean society. But apart from what I have already noted about the non-vocational nature of this education, the humanists contradicted themselves in the promotion of the ideal of an eloquent and learned wife while condemning her to be a mere ventriloquist or reproducer of man’s ideas. Women of eloquence who do not conform to the ideal of the obedient wife and daughter, as Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* shows, are dismissed as hybrid monstrosities with no value in the matrimonial market. In these social conditions, women could not fully invest their little share of humanist learning in expressing their sentiments and thoughts. In the light of the recent excavation of the literature written by women, I qualify without denying the truth
of the following description of the condition of women in Shakespeare’s England made by Virginia Woolf: If a woman in Shakespeare’s day had had Shakespeare’s genius... any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at. [...] Had she survived, whatever she had written would have been twisted and deformed, issuing from a strained and morbid imagination. (1996: 74-75)

**Conclusion**

Admittedly, Woolf was not to the point when she assumes that there were no British women playwrights or authors in the time of Shakespeare. However, I would argue that if she was obliged to conjure up a sister for Shakespeare whom she called Judith, it is because the so-called humanists in Shakespeare’s age like King James I managed to censure the woman’s voice and authorship to such extent that literary historians today are obliged to excavate those female authors who were able to survive the literary witch hunt. On the whole, I can say that if humanism and the Reformation launched the discussion about the nature of women, they did not reshuffle the relations of gender domination. Surely, the “New woman” of whom literary historians of the Tudor and Jacobean periods had made a case really existed because of the male gender anxieties expressed in the literature of the time. However, due to the restricted number of the women and their noble status, the Tudor and Jacobean “feminine mystique” managed to outlive the short-lived of their feminist protest even during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.

**Endnotes**


Blayney Ida Waltz, *The Spirit of Renaissance Humanism and the*