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Women in Medieval Art

Women were considered as second-class citizens throughout the Christian and medieval period and their problems and needs were underestimated by the men of the society because men of medieval period enjoyed much supremacy. Being a woman in that period meant only one thing and that is a suppressive creature that was not given any freedom of speech and was labeled as incompetent, deceitful, sexual and innocent beings. Men of the society held all the power to make decisions for them and never let them speak their mind. Sex was being practiced as a normal activity and acknowledged by the persistence of that era. Women were bound up in sexuality and their participation in sexual activities was noted openly. This is because all the women in the medieval art carry some sexual association. Men of the era took their sexuality as a medicine and healthy activity for the body but when it came to the marriage, men mostly considered the virgin women. They wanted their children to have pure blood. Prostitutes were widely despised by the society. The virgin women were declared as the nuns by the church men because virginity according to them is a treasure and it should be locked and protected for the divine Bridegroom, the Christ. Virginity can purify their soul and is way to salvation.

The status of women in religious terms has been debated during medieval period which is the reason why many women’s movements started in different parts of the world especially in Europe. The medieval art based on women reflects their ideology and represents their roles in the medieval era. They were portrayed as nudes and paintings of this era were painted by men for the men. It is because women were thought of being beautiful who did not mind portraying their body. However, the first and foremost images of devotion were of Holy virgin who was pious and pure. She was respected and adored by a number of people of that era. According to the church, Mary and Eve are two extremely powerful ideals where Eve was considered as a sinful figure that brought sin and death into the world. She was the first one to attempt sin and then passed all the sins to her female descendants. This gave the concept of women being as weaker and evil who need to be controlled by men. On the other hand, Mary is considered as unique and called as virgin mother. She was the one who contributed to the salvation of mankind and set examples of sacrifice. It gives idea that women of this era were defined on the bases of Eve and Mary. On the basis of this definition of Eve and Mary, women were portrayed through art. The images of the believers of Eve were painted as naked and the believers of Mary were painted as poised and fully dressed. The morality and character of women was measured through these arts. The good women were painted as the property of men and labeled as house wife. Women who went against their husbands were painted as traitor and prostitutes. Images in the medieval ages played a vital role in educating people and in stimulating devotion to the church. Some of the writers have claimed that medieval women, especially the wealthy women were portrayed through images(Prince).

Women in medieval ages were under the authoritative power of men and did not enjoy an independent life. For them, life meant living for their husbands and children and remained inside the house throughout their lives. They had to follow the norms because they were not privileged to live independently, it was a patriarchal society and rule of men was practiced everywhere in the country. They were either asked to get married or to ‘take veil’ for the rest of their lives. These norms were made by the men of that era and were strictly being followed by every woman. It is not like they enjoyed being suppressive, rather they wanted independence and wanted to express their feelings. There were some women who challenged the whole system of men’s superiority and went against the stereotypical image of women as oppressed and subservient. Women in the church took the responsibility of becoming abbesses of convent which were considered as senior as and more powerful than monks. Women started working in the political field too and practiced power as queens and regents. For example, Queen Isabella was a powerful figure who brought down her husband’s reign. Research shows that medieval women were rebellious, resilient, skilled and resourceful. They were the reason behind women independence movement started in the first place.

Women and men both showed devotion to Virgin Mary who is also called Mother of God. They considered her as the ultimate divine being that gave the concept of human salvation and regard her glory as the only powerful glory of all time. People believed in her purity and her love for humanity. She was so powerful who sacrificed her son for the sins of humanity and felt proud of his son’s attitude. She was born without sins and that is the reason most of the women of medieval age looked up to her and wanted to be like her. She was a symbol of purity and men of that era presented her as an example to their women. She was the chosen one, who was chosen by God because she was the most powerful, vocal, humble and was open to God’s will. She was very religious woman who loved her son and suffered along with her son. Women of the era were asked to follow the footsteps of Virgin Mary and follow her ethics. It is through following her ethics, women can be considered as faithful and good human beings. They can stay away from all the evil only if they act like Virgin Mary and behave like her. People believed that mankind fell off because of the disobedience to God but Virgin Mary’s sacrifices saved mankind from becoming sinful. She was a source of inspiration for not only women but for men too. They think that the glory of Mary is the glory of God who was never involved in any wrong activity. This was a direct message to all the women who were supposed to do the same as Virgin Mary did.

# Works Cited

Prince, Chloe. ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ Women in Medieval Art. 12 September 2017. 28 October 2019 <https://shenoted.co.uk/2017/09/12/good-and-bad-women-in-medieval-art/>.