

# Novelist Margaret Mitchell's Role as Reporter: A Case Study

Rabia Noor

PhD Research Scholar , Media Education Research Centre, University Of Kashmir

**Abstract-** The veteran novelist Margaret Mitchell, who made history with her only novel, *Gone With The Wind*, had been a reporter earlier, which is known to very few. She had been reporting for Atlanta Journal Sunday Magazine in her hometown Atlanta for four and a half years. The current study has been carried out to find out whether the people, who know her, are aware about her reporting career. It also tried to explore whether she can be a role model for female journalists and if any of her messages hold relevance at present. The study found out that a very few people knew that Margaret Mitchell had been a reporter before writing the historic novel. It also concluded that she can be an inspiration for female journalists and writers and that most of her messages, particularly women-centric, hold relevance even today, when women, though empowered to some extent, face similar problems as were faced during Margaret Mitchell's time.

**Index Terms-** Atlanta Journal, Female Reporter, *Gone With The Wind*, Margaret Mitchell

## I. INTRODUCTION

The word 'journalism' has frequently been associated with men. It is generally deemed to be a masculine field. However, time has witnessed the rise of some courageous and competent female journalists, who forced the humankind to change the notion.

One of such spirited journalists was Margaret Mitchell. She was the most successful historical novelist of the mid-20th century, though her work was confined to a single book '*Gone With the Wind*'. It was the most talked about novel in American popular culture right from the time of its publication, while its screen adaptation turned into the biggest event movie of the 20th century.

Not just her only novel has inspired readers for over sixty years, her own pleasing personality has left a mark through her creation. Mitchell was a strong lady, never ready to let societal rules dictate her behavior or control her life. She lived to the fullest, looking for passion and love. She never stopped to ask permission or submit to anyone's will, but whatever she did was what came from her heart. She was certainly ahead of her time. Although she entered the society in 1920, Mitchell was too free-spirited and intelligent to be satisfied with life as a debutante.

Mitchell was an ideal feminist. Long before modern feminism was even thought of, Mitchell and the awareness she brought through her book helped to push two generations of upper-middle-class and middle-class Southern women into the 20th century. She has worked hard enough in describing the conflict between their proper upbringings and their need for

independence. In a broader context, she played the role of a popular cultural heroine in the city of Atlanta, a status that lingered long after her death.

On its contrary, literary scholars never treated Mitchell kindly, in part because she never published a large body of work open to analysis. Her popularity sustained her reputation, but Mitchell was never treated as seriously as others, say, Erskine Caldwell, who wrote some 50 books, most of them about the South and many of them presenting a very different vision of the subject. Some people believe, *Gone With the Wind* is just an 'emotional' love story. To them, Margaret Mitchell was simply a Southern beauty, who got lucky writing about love and war. But this doesn't seem to be true. Margaret was not only beautiful, but intelligent and curious as well. She may have written only one major novel in her career, but she created a master-piece.

Mitchell never published or even tried to publish another novel. Besides her lack of inclination to do so, various personal and family constraints and the distraction of the Second World War, in which she was heavily involved in the support of troops' morale, made it impossible for her to author any other fiction. On a personal level, she grew more conservative in the decade after the book's publication and subsequently took on various reactionary political positions. Although she was known for her polite relations with the black Americans she was in contact with, she was an opponent of the early Civil Rights Movement.

### A. Life Sketch

Margaret Munnerlyn Mitchell was born on November 8, 1900 in Atlanta, Georgia to a well-known lawyer and the president of the Atlanta Historical Society, Eugene Muse Mitchell, descended from Scotch-Irish and French Huguenots. Her father, himself a historian, taught her to love the history of the South. Her mother, Mary Isabelle 'May Belle' Stephens, a suffragist, was of Irish-Catholic ancestry.

According to the New Georgia Encyclopedia, the family included many soldiers, who had fought in the American Revolution, Irish uprisings and rebellions and the Civil War. Her great-great-great-grandfather Thomas Mitchell fought in the American Revolution, and his son William Mitchell took part in the War of 1812. Her great-grandfather Isaac Green Mitchell was a circuit-riding Methodist minister, who had settled in Marthasville, which later was named Atlanta. Hence, her childhood was spent in the laps of the Civil War veterans, and her maternal relatives, who lived through the war and the years to follow. They told her everything about the war except that the Confederates had lost it. She was ten years old before making this discovery. When she was 15, she wrote, "If I were a boy, I would try for West Point, if I could make it, or well I'd be a prize fighter - anything for the thrills."

Margaret Mitchell, who was lovingly called Peggy, was a storyteller from the very beginning. She would gather her friends around her and tell them tales. She also wrote and produced plays and cast herself and her friends in them. She loved to wear boy's clothes. Her mother wanted her look like a lady by replacing her trousers with skirts and sending her to dance classes. But, Margaret's tom-boyishness was not hidden by skirts. Her walk was boyish and she could climb a tree as fast as any of her brother Stephen's friends. She was accepted by a boys' baseball team to be pitcher, a sport she played until she was fourteen years old. However, she had a tough luck with riding a horse. She had always been coming across mishaps. The first among them came in 1911, when she fell from a horse and suffered from the first of a series of ankle injuries she suffered a couple of times more later on.

In 1912, the family shifted from their home on Jackson Hill in Southeast Atlanta to a white-columned mansion at 1149 Peachtree Street. Young Margaret attended the Washington Seminary for girls, a finishing school. In 1917, she published her first two stories in the school's annual book, 'Facts and Fancies' under the name Peggy. In 1918, she graduated from Washington Seminary and began to study medicine at Smith College, but her mother's death from influenza in the 1918-1919 made it impossible for her to complete the degree. She had to withdraw her final exams in 1919. After her mother's death, she returned to Atlanta to take over the household for her father and brother in May that year. It was not a big loss for Mitchell, for much of her education was self-directed, in any case. She had an irresistible appetite for books, and a big interest in writing and literature.

Mitchell lived the free-spirited life of an open minded girl. She fell in love with Lt. Clifford West Henry, a wealthy Harvard man in 1918. Her boyfriend died fighting on the battlefields of World War I on October 16, 1918. She was married on September 2, 1922 to Berrien 'Red' Kinnard Upshaw against her father's wishes. Upshaw was a drunk and did not earn for home, a fact that forced Mitchell into a career as a reporter with *The Atlanta Journal*. Mitchell filed for divorce and the marriage ended on October 16, 1924, after incidents of physical abuse. Mitchell didn't saw this as end of life. On July 4, 1925 she married a friend and colleague, John Robert Marsh. The couple set up housekeeping in a small one bedroom apartment on Crescent Avenue, which Mitchell lovingly called 'The Dump'. Marsh was originally from Maysville, Kentucky. He was the director of the publicity department in Georgia Power and Light Company.

Mitchell continued the hard luck with riding horse and suffered another ankle injury in 1920. It was the injury that ultimately forced her, in 1926, to resign from her job at *The Atlanta Journal*. Mitchell eventually decided to settle down to more solitary literary activities. She, thus, turned to writing fiction. In 1926, she began writing the book that eventually became '*Gone With the Wind*'. The rest is history.

Mitchell finished the novel in 1929, but she told no one about it, except her husband, and never expected it to be published. The literary world had to wait for the book till 1935, when she finally showed the manuscript to Editor Harold S. Latham. Thanks to Lois Cole, a friend of Mitchell, who worked for Macmillan Publishing in New York, told her boss, Harold Latham, about Margaret's book. Latham went to Atlanta and

met her. He accepted it two months later and offered Mitchell five hundred dollars. The historic *Gone With the Wind* was published in June, 1936 and the book broke sales records. The story centers around the life and times of Scarlett O'Hara, a Southern woman. Mitchell was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in 1937. On April 8, 1938, the novel went off the best-seller list. The novel has been published in 40 countries, with many critical studies and articles.

On December 15, 1939, *Gone With the Wind* came in another form—the film. It was premiered at Loew's Grand Theatre in Atlanta and bagged ten Academy Awards. In England, the film and the book were highly popular during World War II, perhaps partly because of the theme of survival and reconstruction. After the war, the film conquered the rest of the Europe, giving many women comfort and strength in their everyday problems. During World War II, Mitchell was a volunteer selling war bonds and volunteer for the American Red Cross. She was named honorary citizen of Vimoutiers, France, in 1949, for helping the city obtain American aid after WW II. She also set up scholarships for black medical students.

After the success of *Gone With the Wind*, Mitchell spent the rest of her life in checking, editing and rewriting the text to have accuracy in it with John's inputs. On August 16, 1949, Mitchell passed away in Atlanta after accidentally struck by a speeding car while crossing Peachtree Street with her husband. The couple was intending to go to a movie theater to watch the Michael Powell/Emeric Press burger movie, *A Canterbury Tale*. Mitchell was taken to Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia, where she died five days later and is buried in Atlanta's Oakland Cemetery with other members of her family.

#### B. Margaret Mitchell As Reporter

Before making history with *Gone With the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell had been working as a reporter, which is probably known to very few. It was more than a decade before she entered the immortal fictive world, the reporter inside her was trying hard to prove herself. She would walk through the streets of Atlanta, her hometown, in search of news for her popular weekly columns in the *Atlanta Journal Sunday Magazine*.

Mitchell made her debut with *Atlanta Society*, but then continued on with the magazine issue of the journal. From December of 1922 to 1926, she made a self-effacing living for four and a half years as a reporter for the magazine under the name Peggy Mitchell, though her first two stories came under the byline Margaret Mitchell Upshaw. Mitchell was a member of the staff of the *Atlanta Journal Sunday Magazine*. The 22-year-old Mitchell became one of the first woman columnists at the magazine.

Earlier, the magazine city editor, Harlee Branch had shown reluctance to hire Mitchell for he didn't like women to cover hard news for the magazine. She had brought her writing samples that could not impress Branch to the extent that he would offer her a job at *Atlanta Journal*. However, Mitchell got the job by lying to a newspaper man, Angus Perkerson, in an interview about her reporting experience, which she never actually had. Perkerson also carried doubts about the abilities of Mitchell. But, she soon overcame his skepticism and went on to write a weekly column for the newspaper's Sunday edition. She wrote features, news stories and book reviews in addition to the fashion and

society news she had been hired for. However, her articles often touched on the world conditions and the changing role of women.

Mitchell used to reach the office much before her senior colleagues. She would leave home without having breakfast and take the early morning street car to her office. She had to take her breakfast in the little café in the office building, called The Roachery. It was a five-story brick building, situated in the Five Points section of Atlanta.

Mitchell would work in the journal's third floor back office, at a desk besides Medora Field Perkerson, the contributing editor of the journal and wife of Angus Perkerson. She worked on an old Underwood typewriter, then already so old that it had no backspace key. She was the shortest statured and perhaps the only lady working in the office of cigar chomping men. She had to make the legs of her office chair and desk short according to her built.

Mitchell's article on Paris fashion gave her reflections on poverty in Germany. Her reporting style was brisk and appealing, and at the same time, she had an eye for real news as well. Her first article was changed into a news item. It is because she had interviewed an eyewitness to the Italian Revolution, Mary Hines Gunsaulus. The story was published on December 31, 1922, under the title, '*Atlanta Girl Sees Italian Revolution*' under the byline Margaret Mitchell Upshaw, since she was married to Berrien Red Upshaw about four months before joining the journal. However, after her divorce, she requested the editors to publish her stories with the name 'Peggy Mitchell' and continued with the same byline even after her second marriage with John Marsh.

Until she resigned due to ill health in 1926, Mitchell completed hundreds of articles, interviews, sketches, and book reviews, with topics ranging from fashion to fascism and also worked as a proofreader. Her personality sketches and portraits are a glimpse of her ability to draw the kind of unforgettable characters, which made her to produce *Gone With the Wind*, the best-selling novel in history. Mitchell collected her favorite pieces from those years into her personal scrapbooks that are now preserved in the Hargrett Rare Book Library at the University of Georgia; the pieces collected in "*Margaret Mitchell, Reporter*," only a small handful of which have ever been printed again since their original publication. Those are the best of what the author herself considered her most interesting work.

## II. OBJECTIVES

1. To find out if it is known to people that the author of historic novel *Gone With the Wind* was a reporter before
2. To assess whether and how Margaret Mitchell can be a role model to the female journalists and
3. To find out whether Mitchell's message holds relevance even today and how it can prove useful.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### A. Case Study

Case Study seems to be the most appropriate method for the current study, since it involves an in-depth and longitudinal examination of a case. Wilkinson and Bhandarkar (2004) have defined case-study as the method of exploring and analyzing the life of a social unit/entity, be it a role-incumbent (person), a family, an institution, or a community. The case data are always gathered with a view of tracing the natural history of the social unit, and its relationship with the social factors and forces, operative and involved in its surrounding milieu. The social researcher tries to understand the complexities within a social unit as an integrated totality by means of the case-study method.

### B. Survey

The Survey method is the technique of gathering data by asking questions to people, who are thought to have desired information. By this method, large volume of information can be collected from very large population without enumerating the entire population.

The study involved personal interview survey of over a hundred Literature students and a few teachers in University of Kashmir, who were asked questions regarding popularity of Margaret Mitchell. Personal interview surveys are recommended when the desired sample consists of respondents in a very specific target population.

### C. Content Analysis

Content Analysis involves analysis of documents and written records with the objective of describing and classifying them. It is a research technique for making replicable valid inferences from data to their context. This method is relevant for the current study in view of the limited time and resources.

The current study involved Content Analysis of sixty four of the columns written by Margaret Mitchell for Atlanta Journal Sunday Magazine that have been compiled and given a shape of a book by editor Patrick Allen. The book is named Margaret Mitchell Reporter.

The reference period of the study is four years (1922 to 1926).

### D. Sources

The study tried to achieve the objectives through literature related to the topic in the form of articles, books and content available online. They formed the primary as well as secondary sources. The primary and secondary sources were consulted to gather the information about the personal and professional life of Margaret Mitchell. For personal interview survey, Literature students and teachers formed the primary sources.

## IV. FINDINGS

### A. Popularity of Margaret Mitchell

To find out whether people know that before being a novelist, Margaret Mitchell was a reporter, a sample of 126 people with Literature background was taken. The 126 people included 118 Literature students and eight Literature teachers. Of

126 respondents, 75 (69 students and 6 teachers) said they knew Margaret Mitchell. Out of these 75, only 2 students knew that she was working as a reporter before writing *Gone With the Wind*. Statistically, it can be inferred that 51 respondents didn't know

Margaret Mitchell at all and 124 respondents from Literature background didn't know that Mitchell had been working as a reporter.

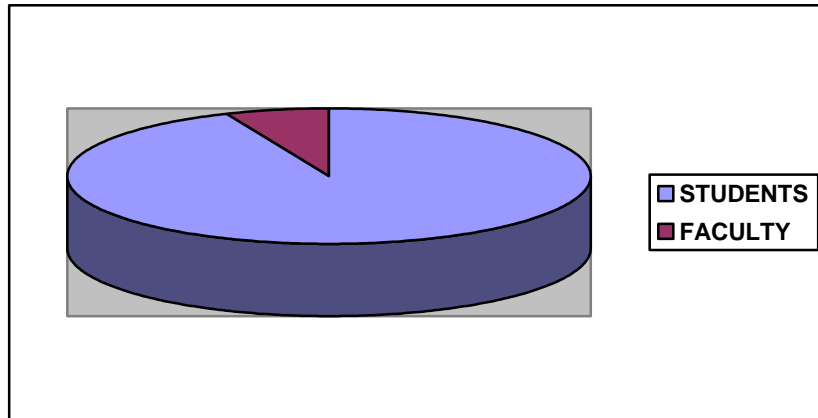


Figure 1: Analysis of Respondents

<b>STUDENTS</b>	<b>93.65%</b>
<b>FACULTY</b>	<b>6.35 %</b>

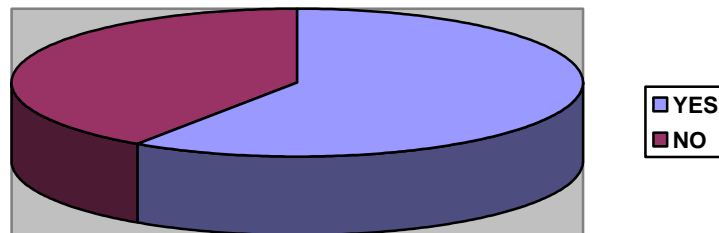


Figure 2: If respondents knew Margaret Mitchell

<b>YES</b>	<b>59.5%</b>
<b>NO</b>	<b>40.5%</b>

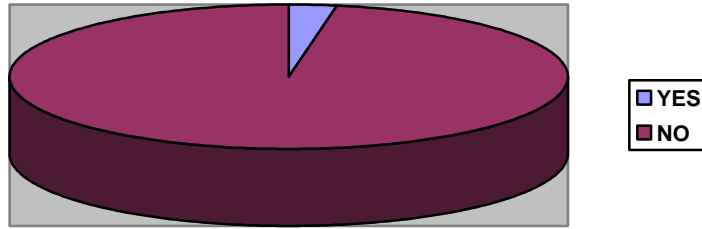


Figure 3: If respondents knowing her knew that Mitchell had been a reporter

<b>YES</b>	<b>2.66%</b>
<b>NO</b>	<b>97.33%</b>

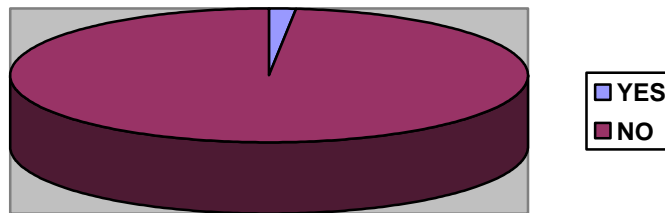


Figure 4: If the respondents (overall) knew that Mitchell had been a reporter

<b>YES</b>	<b>1.6%</b>
<b>NO</b>	<b>98.4%</b>

*B. Content Analysis of Sixty Four Columns*

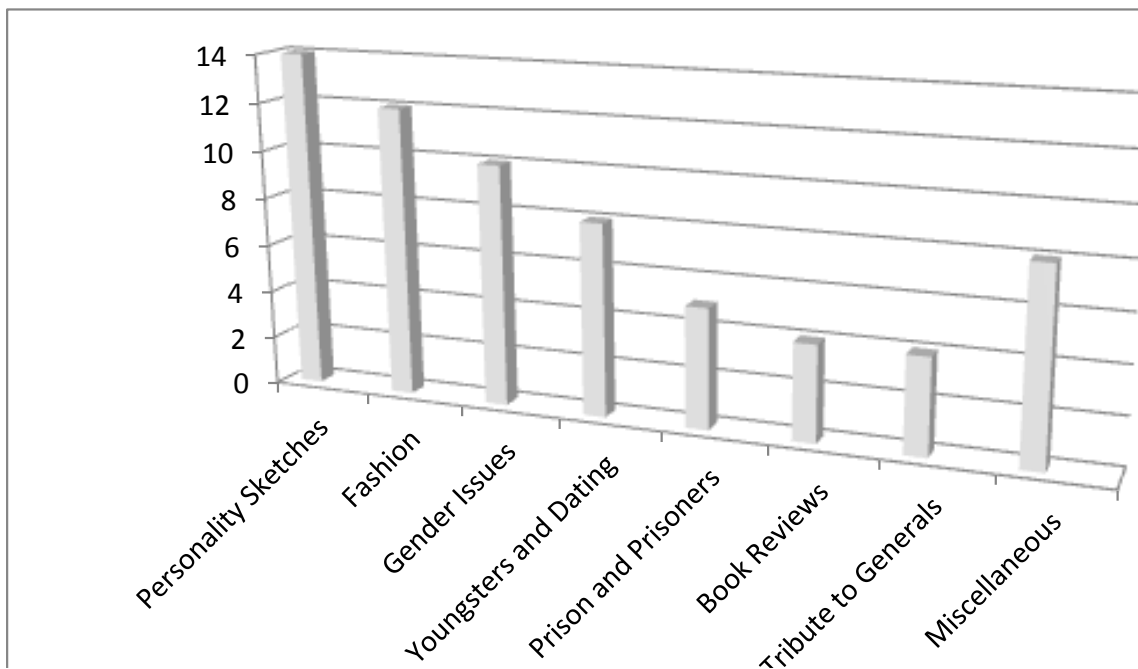


Figure 5: Analysis of 64 Columns by Margaret Mitchell

The sixty four columns written by Margaret Mitchell were divided into following eight categories:

a. Personality Sketches

Personality sketches dominated in the number of columns. The book contains 14 personality-sketches of people who were prominent during Mitchell's time.

b. Fashion

This section includes 12 stories by Mitchell, who was actually hired to write about fashion. She had done a tremendous job in writing about the latest styles and trends of her time.

c. Gender Issues

Mitchell was a feminist and perhaps the first to talk about feminism. She highlighted various women-centered issues through her writings. This section includes 10 stories.

d. Youngsters and Dating

Mitchell wanted to find out the interests of the young boys and girls and also wanted to see what they felt about the persons of opposite gender. Mitchell's collection included a handful of 8 stories on youngsters of Atlanta.

e. Prison and Prisoners

Margaret Mitchell has also done some exclusive stories on life of prisoners in Atlanta. One may find hard to resist reading these stories after going through the first few sentences. The stories are 5 in number.

f. Book Reviews

The columns include 4 reviews of the books Mitchell had analyzed.

g. Tribute to Generals

Mitchell also took time to pay tribute to some immortal Generals of Georgia. This section includes 4 stories.

h. Miscellaneous

Apart from the above seven sections, Mitchell covered some interesting features on different subjects that formed the Miscellaneous category. This section includes 8 columns, which include stories on spring season, Atlanta's favorite limericks, road show girls, etc.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The study came up with following conclusions:

### A. Popularity of Mitchell's Reporting

Very few people know that Margaret Mitchell was a reporter before writing *Gone With the Wind*. Out of the sample of 126 people interviewed, only two people knew about it, which means only 1.6 per cent of people know about Mitchell's journalistic career.

### B. Role Model for Female Journalists

Margaret Mitchell can surely be an inspiration for the female journalists and writers. Infact, she can be a role model to women overall. They can learn a lot from her life. Her life was not like that of an ordinary woman. She had come across many

adversities before earning a name for herself. She was a strong lady. No one could make her submit to their will, but whatever she did was what she wanted to.

Mitchell worked as a journalist at a time when her mother had passed away and she had perhaps nobody to look after her home and her father and brother. It is an accepted fact that journalism is a profession that needs one's all time presence. Mitchell, despite her limitations at home, managed to leave a mark in the field. She has set an example that a woman can simultaneously run her home and office, without making one suffer because of the other. She proved that if a woman wants to, she can pursue her career amidst any hardship. Her first husband was a drunk and would often beat her. This could be hard to bear for anybody, but Mitchell nicely overcame all this and in fact mustered courage to divorce the man during her reporting days. Mitchell was the only female working among many men in the office. It speaks of her bravery and guts to work with the people of opposite gender. She would often reach her office much before her male colleagues, proving the notion wrong that women are sluggish in comparison to men. She would not even take her breakfast before leaving for office, which speaks of her determination and urge to work.

It's not just her personality one can be inspired from, but also the work she did. She was the woman, who dared to talk about feminism and support the concept at a time, when not even a man could dare to speak about it. Her work didn't revolve around gender issues only, but she also showed the courage to write about criminals. She dared to enter the prisons and talk to the prisoners about their lives. This indicated that if a woman is willing to, she can reach anywhere that only a man is believed to reach.

### C. Relevance of Her Messages

Mitchell was a strong feminist. Perhaps, she talked about feminism at the time, when there was even no concept of it. Mitchell's columns talked about the changing role of women, their career, feelings, marriages and divorces and how women were being treated by men. Most of her messages concerning women hold relevance even in the 21st century, when women, though empowered to some extent, face similar problems as were faced during Margaret Mitchell's time.

In many of her stories, Mitchell highlighted the importance of being independent for a woman. She underlined the need of taking up jobs or setting up business ventures for women. This is evident from her columns, like *Society Girls Take Up Business*, *Jobs Before Marriage For High School Girls*, *Do Working Girls Make the Best Wives?* and so on.

In her story *Society Girls Take Up Business*, Mitchell pointed towards Atlanta girls, who would work in offices and private schools, run shops and did designing and other work, which she wrote, made their idly sitting friends envy. By making this comparison, she wanted to convey the charm of professional life. This message holds relevance today also, when career is important for a woman, by which she can move ahead with time. Mitchell further conveyed that a job before marriage was also worthwhile, since one never knew how her married life and her husband were going to be like. In her story, *Jobs Before Marriage For High School Girls*, she raised this point, while taking views from high school girls to substantiate her argument.

The message can prove more useful in present times, when divorce rates are increasing rapidly. A woman after divorce can always rely upon her job and can be independent. There is a similar argument in the story, *Do Working Girls Make the Best Wives*, wherein Mitchell mentioned that it was a must for girls to work before marriage, not just for their sake, but also for the sake of their marriage. By working, a girl would understand the value of money and realize how hard money is earned. She would also understand how tiresome a man feels when he returns home in the evening, wanting to do nothing other than having rest. Hence, she wouldn't insist her husband to take her to dinner or a movie in the evening. This would lend a better understanding between the couple.

Mitchell also talked about the other side of marriage—divorce. In her story, *Shot Three Times and Missed Him----Divorced*, she presented many reasons for why a married couple was left with no option other than divorce. She concluded that 'loss of temper' was the primary cause of many separations. Temper that leads to sullenness plays a vital role in divorces. This message can be useful in 21st century, where people are becoming more and more intolerant and take hasty decisions in rage. Today's generation can learn the things to do while being in a serious relation.

In her story, *Pulling Teeth in a Harem*, Mitchell talked about the need of women doctors and teachers in India, for Hindus did not prefer male doctors to treat their women. So lady doctors can be an alternative. Although the concept of Hindus not letting their women visit male doctors is outdated, it cannot be denied that there is a dearth for female doctors.

Mitchell also stressed on the significance of taking part in polls for women. In her story, *Do Husbands Object to Their Wives Voting*, she pointed out that many women did not appear at polls due to their husbands' objection. Mitchell called it a 'poor and old-fashioned' thinking and compared it with ancient times when husbands would beat their wives to make them abide by their orders.

Mitchell argued that men and women were equal in all aspects and demanded equal rights for them. She highlighted the issue in her story, *Just Like a Woman; Ditto for Men*. She rated women slightly higher than men, for she believed, they possess more patience than men and can look after their home better. The argument holds relevance today also, when people are talking about gender equality.

### REFERENCES

- [1] Allen, Patrick (ed), *Margaret Mitchell Reporter*. Athens: Hill Street Press, 2000
- [2] Denscombe, Martyn, *The Good Research Guide For Small-Scale Research Projects*. New Delhi: Viva Books Private Limited, 1999
- [3] Edwards, Anne, *Road to Tara: The Life of Margaret Mitchell*. New Haven: Ticknor and Fields, 1983
- [4] Encyclopedia.com
- [5] Feminist.com
- [6] Margaret Mitchell House and Museum (<http://www.margaretmitchellhouse.com>)
- [7] Mitchell, Margaret, *Gone With the Wind*. New York: Warner Books, 1936
- [8] Pyron, Darden Asbury, *Southern Daughter: The Life of Margaret Mitchell*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991
- [9] Reference.com

- [10] The News Georgia Encyclopedia (<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org>)
- [11] Wikipedia.org
- [12] Wilkinson, T. S. and Bhandarkar, P. L; *Methodology and Techniques of Social Research*. Mumbai: Himalaya Publishing House, 2004

AUTHORS

**First Author** – Ms. Rabia Noor, Qualification- M.Phil in Mass Communication and Journalism from University of Kashmir  
Affiliation- PhD Scholar, Media Education Research Centre,  
University of Kashmir, Srinagar- 190006, India  
Email- [rabia.kajal@gmail.com](mailto:rabia.kajal@gmail.com)