
THE FEMINIST LITERARY CREATION IN THE VICTORIAN AGE

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Abstract: *THIS PAPER WILL BE CONCERNED WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINISM THROUGHOUT THE 19TH CENTURY OF THE ENGLISH LITERATURE, DISCUSSING THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PERCEPTION ON THIS TOPIC. THE 19TH CENTURY WAS ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT PERIODS OF THE BRITISH HISTORY, NEVERTHELESS IT WAS A CENTURY OF CHANGES FOR WOMEN. THROUGHOUT THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES, LITERATURE HAS DEVELOPED AS WELL AS THE SOCIETY AND THE POSITION OF WOMEN WITH RESPECT TO MEN. THIS PERPETUAL FIGHT FOR EQUALITY BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN HAD A STARTING POINT AND THIS WAS THE SUFFRAGETTE MOVEMENT. THERE HAS BEEN A GRADUAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT THROUGHOUT THE CENTURIES. THEREFORE, THE WORD “FEMINISM” CAN EVOKE NEGATIVE OR POSITIVE MEANINGS FOR THOSE WHO TRY TO DISCOVER ITS ROOTS.*

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1. Introduction and context of the study

In order to get a clear picture about the cultural concept of *feminism*, we have to define the key terms that lay at the basis of our analysis. The origin of *feminism* comes from late 19th century and is the English form of the French *féminisme*. As Cambridge online dictionary says, it is “the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state.”¹ The term is used to outline the political, cultural or economic movement having the goal that both men and women should have equal rights. However, the words "feminism" and "feminist" got a wide dispersion of their meaning only after the 1970s when they started to be employed in the public discourse more frequently. What is truly important is to make a clear distinction between fighting for women’s rights and the hate for men.

¹ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/feminism>, accessed December 14, 2023

In a patriarchal society where women are “casts as weak and irrational and men as strong rational”² and where men are considered dominant to women, and masculinity is valued over femininity, all the privileges went to men. In this case, the word privilege needs to be explained as the advantages experienced by a dominant group, which obscures the disadvantages of others. Those facts made the feminist motion involving sociological and political theories regarding gender issues.

Feminists have rejected the traditionalist arguments as invalid and patriarchal and sought to show that their effects were to legitimize and protect male privileges and to entrench female disadvantages in education, employment, politics and personal and domestic relationships. However, there are also disputes within feminism around the concepts of sex and gender and in this aspect we must distinguish between egalitarian and feminism.

During mid 1850s when the first feminists started to advocate their ideas about inequality and the first suffragette movement appeared, the British women have began to battle against the oppression and started working on achieving their goals to have the same rights and the same position in society as men have.

Their program outlined the problems: from definitions to what kinds of questions could be asked. According to *Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Development* written by Jane L. Parpart et al, inequality comes from “the need to establish unequal incentives to motivate the most talented people to do the most important jobs efficiently in society”³, and searching more into the same book, another definition also says that inequality results from “the practice of providing differential rewards to keep a less powerful working class fragmented by gender and race.”⁴

The mixed opinions of Queen Victoria herself make an interesting illustration of some of its different aspects relating to the “Woman Question”. “Believing in education for her sex, she gave support and encouragement to the founding of a college for women in 1847. On the other hand, she opposed the movement to give women the right to vote, which she described in a letter as *this mad folly*. But most interesting, for our purposes, is another letter in which she comments on women and marriage. In 1858, writing to her recently married daughter, Victoria remarks: *There is great happiness...in devoting oneself to another who is worthy of one’s affection; still, men are very selfish and the woman’s devotion is always one of submission which makes our poor sex so very unenviable. This you will feel hereafter – I know; though it cannot be otherwise as God has willed it so.*”⁵

2. The feminist movement

Feminist literature is identified by the characteristics of the feminist movement. Authors of feminist literature are known to understand and explain the difference between sex and gender. They believe that though a person's sex is predetermined and natural, it is the gender that has been created by society, along with a particular perception about gender roles. Gender roles, they believe, can be altered over time. The predominance of one gender over the other is a common concept across almost all societies, and the fact that it is not in favor of women is an underlying yet blatant characteristic of feminist or women's literature. Here, it is argued that any society that does not provide channels of learning and knowledge to both genders equally is not a complete and impartial society.

Critics argue that there wasn't much difference between male and female authors, and that there was no need to identify a separate class of literature termed as feminist or look for traces of feminism

² <https://quizlet.com/12529311/feminist-criticism-terms-flash-cards/> accessed December 14, 2023.

³ https://books.google.cz/books/about/Theoretical_Perspectives_on_Gender_and_D.html?id=6xunfW2ShQkC&redir_esc=y accessed December 20, 2023.

⁴ https://books.google.cz/books/about/Theoretical_Perspectives_on_Gender_and_D.html?id=6xunfW2ShQkC&redir_esc=y accessed December 20, 2023

⁵ Abrams, M. H. general editor, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Seventh Edition, Volume 2, Norton & Company Ltd., USA. P.1719.



in literature. However, if such works were to be read, there will be the realization of how such writers criticized society's androcentric (male-centered) approach and tried to understand the beliefs and needs of the opposite sex with a subjective, and not an objective, approach.

Women in feminist literature are always featured as the protagonist, who, more often does not readily accept the traditional role of women as decided by society. They are ready to make their own decisions, to express this choice of personal decision-making, and are ready to deal with the consequences of these choices, actions, and decisions. Though a daughter, a mother, a sister, or a wife, any piece of feminist literature first deals with a woman as a woman. It is not these relationships, roles, or stereotypes that shape the identity of female characters within the literary scene. Their identity is defined by their choices and their beliefs, which are then associated with these roles. It is important to note that not all works of feminist literature have happy endings, both for the character and for the author of the work. Women have been ostracized by a misogynist⁶ society, for openly demanding equality, and have had to face several negative consequences of their decision to go against the waves. According to Manasia⁷ the introduction of the feminist concept lead to revolutionary changes in the Victorian thinking.

Women have been treated as important subjects even in many literary works by men. Not all, but some novels of feminist literature (particularly non-fiction) showcase and stress on women's suffrage and a demand for equality in society, for political, social, and economic rights. In modern feminist literature, the attack on a male-dominated society became more forthright and straightforward, where women demanded a closer look into the patriarchal and capitalistic approach towards feminism.

3. The Victorian context

A great deal of Victorian intellectual effort was spent in trying to hold together a universe which was exploding. It was an age of conflicting explanations and theories, of scientific and economic confidence and of social and spiritual pessimism, of a sharpened awareness of the inevitability of progress and of deep disquiet as to the nature of the present. While Britain was at the height of its wealth, power and influence, large sections of its population lived and worked in appalling conditions. Abroad, the British Empire continued to claim new territories while, at home, age-old rural communities were disappearing. Scientific and technological advances paved the way for a better future as traditional religious beliefs began to crumble under the weight of new scientific discovery. Britain enjoyed a surge of national pride and confidence but many people viewed the future with deepening pessimism. The growing pains, confidence and loss of consensus in Victorian society are all reflected in its literature.

Like all ages it was an age of paradox, but the paradoxes of the mid-nineteenth century struck contemporaries as more stark and disturbing than those which had faced their ancestors. Manasia⁸ highlighted the fact that women writers in the Victorian age had to face a wide variety of institutional constraints. Religion remained a powerful force in Victorian life and literature. If the vast number of those who failed to attend public worship on the census Sundays were working-class men and women who easily found alternative and more agreeable ways of spending the one day of rest allowed to them, there were also, amongst the educated classes, deep and growing doubts as to the very doctrinal and historical bases of Christianity.

⁶ A society, who hates, dislikes, mistrusts, or mistreats women – according to <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/misogynist?s=t> accessed on November 15, 2023

⁷ M. G. Manasia, Pseudonymity: Victorian women authors' recognition strategy, *British and American Studies*, Timisoara, Vol 27, 113-121, 2021

⁸ M. G. Manasia, Disguised defiance: the hidden feminist voices of Victorian literature, *Research and Science Today Journal*, 2(26)/2023

Political and legal reforms in the course of the Victorian period had given citizens many rights. In 1844 Friedrich Engels observed: “England is unquestionably the freest- that is the least unfree – country in the world, North America not excepted”⁹. England had indeed done much to extend its citizens’ liberties, but women did not share in these freedoms. They could not vote or hold political office. (Although petitions to Parliament advocating women’s suffrage were introduced as early as the 1840s, women did not get the vote until 1918.) Until the passage of the Married Women’s Property Acts (1870-1908), married women could not own or handle their own property. Although men could divorce their wives for adultery, wives could divorce their husbands only if adultery were combined with cruelty, bigamy, incest, or bestiality. Educational and employment opportunities for women were limited. These inequities stimulated a spirited debate about women’s roles known as the “Woman Question”. Arguments for women’s right were based on the libertarian principles that had formed the basis of extended rights for men. In Hardy’s last novel, *Jude the Obscure* (1895), his heroine justifies leaving her husband by quoting a passage from Mill’s *On Liberty*. She might have quoted another work by Mill. *The Subjection of Women*, which, like Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), challenges long-established assumptions about women’s role in society.

The changing conditions of women’s work created by the Industrial Revolution posed an equally strong challenge to traditional views of women’s roles. The explosive growth of the textile industries brought hundreds of thousands of lower- class women into factory jobs with grueling working conditions, and the need for coal to fuel England’s industrial development brought women into the mines. The Factory Acts (1802-78) introduced increasing regulation of the conditions of labor in mines and factories, including reduction of the sixteen-hour day.

There was also agitation for improved employment opportunities for women. Writers as diverse as Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Barret Browning, and Florence Nightingale complained that middle class women were taught trivial accomplishments to fill up days in which there was nothing important to do. The problem of nothing to do was acute in quite a different way for what contemporary journalist called “surplus” or “redundant” women, that is, the women in the population who remained unmarried because of the imbalance in numbers between the sexes. Such women (of whom there were approximately half a million in mid-Victorian England) had few employment opportunities, none of them attractive or profitable. Emigration was frequently proposed as a solution to the problem, but the number of single female emigrants was never high enough to affect significantly the population imbalance. Bad working conditions and underemployment drove thousands of women into prostitution, which became increasingly professionalized in the nineteenth century. The only occupation at which an unmarried middle-class woman could earn a living and maintain some claim to gentility was that of a governess, but a governess could expect no security of employment, only minimal wages, and an ambiguous status, somewhere between servant and family member, that isolated her within the household. Perhaps because the governess so clearly indicated the precariousness of the unmarried middle-class woman’s status in Victorian England, the governess novel, of which the most famous examples are *Jane Eyre* and *Vanity Fair*, became a popular genre through which to explore women’s roles in society.

As such novels indicate, Victorian society was preoccupied not only with legal and economic limitations on women’s lives but the very nature of women. In *The Subjection of Women* John Stuart Mill argues that “what is now called the nature of women is eminently an artificial thing – the result

⁹ Abrams, M. H. general editor, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Seventh Edition, Volume 2, Norton & Company Ltd., USA. P.1055.



of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others“.¹⁰ In Tennyson’s *The Princess* the king voices a more traditional view of woman’s role:

“Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey.”¹¹

The king’s relegation of women to the hearth and heart reflects an ideology the claimed that woman had a special nature peculiarly fit for her domestic role. Most aptly epitomized by the title of Coventry Patmore’s immensely popular poem *The Angel in the House* (1854-62), this concept of womanhood stressed woman’s purity and selflessness. Protected and enshrined within the home, her role was to create a place of peace where man could take refuge from the difficulties of modern life. In *Of Queen’s Gardens* John Ruskin writes:

“This is the true nature of home – it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home; so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently- minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed either by husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home; it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted fire in. But so far as it is a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods,... so far it vindicates the name , and fulfils the praise , of home.”¹²

Such an exalted conception of home placed great pressure on the woman who ran it to be, in Ruskin’s words, “enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise - wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation.”¹³ It is easy to recognize the oppressive aspects of this ideology. Paradoxically, however, it was used not only by antifeminists, eager to keep woman in her place, but by some feminists as well, in justifying the special contribution that woman could make to public life.

¹⁰ Abrams, M. H. general editor, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Seventh Edition, Volume 2, Norton &Company Ltd., USA. p.1056.

¹¹ <https://www.quotery.com/quotes/man-field-woman-hearth-man> accessed November 20, 2023.

¹² Abrams, M. H. general editor, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Seventh Edition, Volume 2, Norton &Company Ltd., USA. p.1056.

¹³ http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/victorian/topic_2/ruskin.htm accessed December 22, 2023.



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