



An Overview of Feminism in the Victorian Era

Swetha.V, II MA English Literature, Dr. SNS Rajalakshmi College of Arts and Science (Autonomous), Coimbatore – 641049.

Dr.Mr. N Moses Sunderraj, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Dr. SNS Rajalakshmi College of Arts and Science (Autonomous), Coimbatore – 641049.

Abstract:

This essay looks at the idea of the “New-Woman” in Victorian literature across all genres and written by both men and women. At this time, the “New-Woman” was also known as the “Woman Question.” Feminism, the “New- Woman,” and the “Woman Question” are all used interchangeably in this essay. Four topics are addressed in this article:

The issue that Victorian women had, important feminism-related occasions, laws, and writings The Victorian writer and the “Woman Question” come last, followed by Queen Victoria and feminism. The 19th-century author wrote poems, plays, novels, essays, and other literary works. Using the feminist critical theory, the paper claims that the article indicates the “New- Woman” presentation was a major subject in Victorian literature. During the Victorian era, “Question” was so distracting that no writer could avoid it, and feminism actually the Victorian era, when women received or essentially began to receive tremendous advancements in their existence.

Keywords: Victorian, feminism, “New-Woman”, the “Woman Question”, conservative, liberal, radical.

Introduction:

The issues facing Victorian women, significant legislation, publications, and Queen Victoria’s relationship with feminism will all be covered in this essay, as will the relationship between Victorian writers and feminism, or the “New-woman” (The “New-Woman” in the plays, the “New-Woman” in novels, the “New-Woman” in essays or Treatises and the “New-Woman” in poetry). The goal of this piece is to demonstrate that feminism or the woman question was the preoccupation of many Victorian writers.

The Problems Of The Victorian Woman:

During the Victorian era, women had principally two grievances : the vote and property rights. The other problems concerned the law, separate spheres, sex and marriage, economy, prostitution, middleclass women and intelligence. From a legal point of view, women were incompetent and irresponsible. William Blackstone, an eighteenth Century English jurist said that in the eyes of the law husband and wife were one, and that one person was the husband. A married woman was entitled to no legal recourse in any matter, unless it was sponsored and endorsed by her husband. Helpless in the eyes of civil authority, the married woman was in the same category with criminals and lunatics. In short, the Victorian woman was her husband’s chattel. She was totally reliant on him and under his control. She lacked the legal right to file divorce or claim custody of her kids if the marriage decided to part ways. She was unable to create a will or retain her income. After getting hitched, Victorian brides renounced to their husbands the ownership of property and personal fortune.

It was during the Victorian period that the concept of separate spheres for men and women started. These spheres were the public for men and the private or home for women. The woman had her area of expertise which was the home where she was the mother, the homemaker and a devoted domestic. This philosophy of the separation of spheres for men and women was determined by gender. Men were competitive, assertive and materialistic while women were pious, pure, gentle and sacrificing.

As Elizabeth Lee points out in “Victorian Theories of Sex and Sexuality”, there were two human natures corresponding to the masculine and the feminine because of this principle of separate spheres. As we have said above, one stereotype image of women was that they were pure and pious. This is a stereotype which is a positive one. This image of the woman as pure and pious led to the concept of the angel in the house which reminds us of the famous poem of this era: “The Angel in the House” by Coventry Patmore. This image although a stereotype, is a positive one and marked a shift from the image of the woman portrayed in the medieval period influenced by the book of Genesis in the Bible which portrayed or represented a woman as an agent of the devil.

The question may be asked: why were women portrayed as pure, pious and even as angels in the Victorian Era? There are four reasons. The first reason was because of the “disappearance of God” in the Victorian period prompted by the advances of science in the name of Darwinism. With the “disappearance of God”, theological imagery was shifted from the sacred onto the secular figure of the woman. Secondly, the Victorian experienced evil outside the home. Women at home were either, angelic or regalic – angel or queen. Thirdly Auerbach observed that it was only in the nineteenth century that painters began regularly to portray angels as females. This maybe because of the activities of feminists or the presence of the figure of Queen Victoria. Lastly Auerbach says that the depiction of women as angels was worked out from a tradition that went back at least as far as the German poet and novelist Goethe whose Faust in Faust (1808/1832) is redeemed by the “eternal feminine” (das Ewige weibliche) which draws man’s mind to higher things. Such thinkers employed a rhetoric drawn from religion to characterize the good mother as a kind of virginal angel. A problem arises only when a writer presents a woman full of contradiction: she is an angel and at the same time a monster, a virgin and whore.

As early as 1600, jurists made it clear that husbands were entitled to the privileges of marriage. Auguste Debay constructed a regimented schedule for marital sexual relations. A young husband was reasonable if he exercised his rights four times a week and gradually limited his rights with age. She was even believed to be asexual. The Victorian marriage was a patriarchal authoritarian institution wherein the husband was family protector and representative. However, he who was expected to protect, often became the abuser in the bedroom.

Victorian women were also deprived of property rights. They wanted to handle their own property instead of being exclusively dependent upon the wishes of their husbands, agitation which culminated successfully in the passing of the Married Woman’s Property Acts (1870 – 1908). Most women were seamstresses in the 1840s “*Slaves of the Needle*”. Domestic service was also “the muted and forgotten” occupation where they spent eighty hours a week as opposed to female factory workers who spent fifty-six hours a week. The problem of the reduction of the factory and mine workers was solved when the women argued that they were comparatively frail physically. They did not use the argument that the two were equals. These sixteen hours a day comparatively to ten and a half hours for women and children.

Another problem of the Victorian woman which was also economic was the problem of prostitution and middleclass women. Bad working conditions and underemployment pushed 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 Governess. The problem of this job was that the governess could expect no security of employment. She had minimal wages and an ambiguous status which was somewhere between the servant and the family member and which confined and isolated her within the household. It is believed that it was because of the precariousness of the unmarried middle-class woman’s status as a governess in Victorian England that the governess novel became such a popular genre through which to explore woman’s role in society. Two famous examples of the Governess novels are *Jane Eyre* and *Vanity Fair*.

Scientists like Charles Darwin backed the idea that men have more mental power than women. Women were appreciated for the characteristics that were thought to be unique to their sex: submissiveness, domestic devotion, innocence, and unworldliness.

Events, Legislation and Publications Crucial To Victorian Feminism:

The Victorian woman had to deal with the aforementioned issues, hence solutions had to be found. These answers took the form of occasions, laws, and the release of a few articles and novels. Articles of novels and essays, publications, events, and laws can all be categorized into four categories. Laws, publications, events, and legislation discussing the value of education for women. Lastly, there are publications, events, and laws discussing the procurement of women's issues. The rights of women (vote, property, child custody, work). The fact that some of these occurrences and laws and magazines existed before the Victorian era, but it is undeniable that it was during that time.

We can only compare a "New-Woman" to the woman of the past and not the woman of the future. This is a literal but logical way of reasoning. Therefore the reasons for the use of the word cannot only be literary. Political, economic and religious reasons can also be advanced which warranted the use of the word "New-Woman". Economic wise the Industrial Revolution might have made it possible for the use of the word the "New-Woman". Although Ibsen does not explicitly refer to the "New-Woman" in *A Doll's House*, the term occurs as the subject and title of a roughly contemporary British play *The New Woman* by Sydney Grundy. This play appears in the book *The New Woman and her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850 – 1814* by his Gardner and Susan Rutherford.

In this poem, the Victorian doctrine of the separate spheres for men and women is well spelt out. The statement

Comes from the prince's father who is a male supremacist:

Man for the field and woman for the heart
 Man for sword and for the needle she;
 Man with the head, and woman with the heart
 Man to command and woman to obey;
 All else confusion (Millet 78).

The king's relegation of woman to heart and hearth reflects a belief that woman's special nature fits her for domestic role as described in Coventry Patmore's poem "The Angel in the House". The irascible old man sees in princess Ida a likely breeder of warriors, and advises his son to get her.

Man is the hunter, woman is his game.
 The sleek and shining creatures of the chase;
 We hunt them for the beauty of their skins;
 They love us for it and we ride them down (Millet 79).

The imagery in the above verses is that of war, violence and oppression. Man is the oppressor and woman is the oppressed. The poem is autobiographical. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was an "English poet, political thinker and feminist". In *Aurora Leigh*, she sets out to attack the degrading education most nineteenth century women received and defended their right to intellectual self-determination. In this poem, she defends a woman's right to intellectual freedom and addresses the concerns of the female artist.

Conclusion:

In this paper we have discussed the problems which the Victorian women faced and attempts to solve these problems by the parliament through legislative acts, publications by writers of literary works and also by the pro-feminist politics of the Supreme Head or the crown represented at the time by Queen Elizabeth and lastly we looked at the image of the New-woman in Victorian literature.

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