



Feminism As A Challenge to The Victorian Sentiments : It's Impact on Society And Literature As Depicted in the Novels of Dickens and The Contemporary Writers-

Suman Mishra

Research Scholar

JJTU, Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan

Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine how the Victorian era novelists, responded to the emergence of the feminist from the feminine, a transition from the needle work and knitting to seek employment in public sphere and to scrutinize and discuss the long journey of feminism, Dickens and contemporary writers who put emphasis on perception of women's identity during the Victorian period Impact of feminism on the society.

Keywords: *Feminism, Women's Identity*

INTRODUCTION

The fight for women's emancipation has been there for centuries through dormant in the previous era, but the sprouting of radical activity in the women's movement gathered impetus and reached its peak in the late Victorian era. The feminist agitation of the era was a noticeable feature which shocks the Victorian conservative. The term was first used by French dramist Alexander Dumas in 1872. From the Hebrew Bible and Greek philosophy to the present, the female tends to be defined by negative reference-weak, docile, virile and sensual. Study of Victorian feminists are a source of interest to the extend modern feminism. The link between novelists and feminists can be discerned in their intention to bring in reforms. The transition era saw a change in the very image of women, the angel in the house was slowly transforming into assertive women, a woman finding her voice which stimulated confusions in the very understanding of the new woman. The literature that stimulated such confusions signals their readability value. Feminism has shown interest in re-fashioning the past literature which is a positive sign to revisit.

The transition resulted in changes in the cultural attitudes and popular notions about women and men. The novels are in themselves formidable studies of the period. Victorian fiction depicted women in vivid ways while some confirmed to the proper feminine image other presented an image contrary to the feminine image. The controversial depiction of women triggered the complacency of the conservatives. Heated debates, revolutions, movements, affected the content and the subject matter of

the novel. George Levine affirms, “perhaps the most important critical development out of Victorianism was feminism.” What needs to be examined is the very understanding of the women that underwent a change, to recognize whether such a change laid the foundation for future feminism. Such scrutiny raises plethora of questions. There were certain factors which led to the emergence of the feminist from the feminine. Many contemporary writers came against patriarchal forces in search of the feminine identity and their self assertion like Dickens, Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, Emily Bronte, Elizabeth Gaskell, Virginia Woolf, Gissing, Isben. These novelists interpret women’s silence, and show what it is to lose voice.

Victorian era is used as a central focus to explore the contradiction ideologies as regarding women’s assertion and challenge. These novelists dealt with burning topics-gender politics, women question, resistance and conformity. They picture women’s journey toward a new image of the feminine the depiction of women’s struggle to assert herself within the cultural constraints. Through a meaningful insights into their work ,they brought significant developments in the Victorian novel which not only lends itself to tackle issues such as patriarchy, woman’s place ,sexuality and identity.

Victorian period-a period of thought:

The Victorian era was massively conservative very vividly and authentically. The most burning issues in the Victorian era were the religious controversies, the scientific innovations, liberation of women, and the invention of new forms of machines (the press and the railways).The role of women in the Victorian era to give birth to children and to take care of the house, in contrast to men, who enjoyed the economic and political power. The ideology of women seen as their husband’s property was viewed by Victorian moralists as the perfect ideal wife. Throughout the Victorian period the perfect lady was an ideal of femininity. Women who deviated from the narrow definition were branded as virile and even sharp tongued. John Stuart Mill in “The Subjection of Women (1870) observes, ‘Women are brought from their earliest years in the belief that the ideal of character in the very opposite of that of men; not self-will and self government.....but submission and yielding to control, of others....(qtd.Maier 9)

The domestic sphere, confined women to domestic servility barring her from education and participation in public activity. Queen Victoria’s loyalty to her husband and commitment to her family made her the icon of 19th century middle class femininity and domesticity. She came to be seen as the apotheosis of marital immutability and domestic fortitude because of these notions women were kept far away from the public sphere. Britain was under Queen Victoria’s regime English society failed to reckon this ironical fact. Woman had the power to rule yet she was servile to the male will. Women’s expertise was restricted to domestic province. The ideal woman was morally upright and inclined to serve others. Women’s fashions were another issue; their dress were designed and prescribed by the society. No doubt, women proved her power in this limited orb but this did not give her the autonomy to transgress the patriarchal boundaries. The period between the 1840’s and 1860’s was marked by heated debates on the woman question. The era displays an array of intellectual female thinkers who began to state their case.

Quaker and the Unitarian traditions instilled progressive views on social and political concerns that provided momentum for British feminism. According to Sue Morgan (2007) observations, Quakers and Unitarians gave a radical twist to shape the revolutionary project of the feminist. Quaker’s believed in the innate equality of women and men. Like the Quakers, the Unitarians were known for their egalitarian ideas. It was a theological movement that rejected the conservative doctrines of the

protestant; Unitarians believed and spread the doctrine of another. A women's place in society was ensured only through marriage and the patriarchal society knew how to enclose women in the family. Women in addition to being a dedicated wife had to be a devoted mother as it gave her spiritual and moral comfort. Thinkers like Jacques Rousseau supported the feminine notion idealized the role of the female, Dickens in his famous novels, *Emily*(1762)propounded that the duty of women is surveillance to man, and that woman should be taught how to be useful to man, to please and advise man.

Single woman's position was ambiguous for they did not belong to any rightful status. Single woman was fated to suffer, her inability to give birth to children owing to her single status estranged her from the familiar notions of femininity. They became masculine hags, they were seen as the transgressor of the Victorian norm, and were considered low. The fear of being marginalized made women embrace Marriage. As for social importance, motherhood was represented as the powerful ideal in the 19th century domestic world.Feminist struggle was not about motherhood but was about subjugation of women in the name of motherhood and feminine virtue.

WRITERS FOR THE SAKE OF FEMINISM

Emancipation of women was the driving theme of many Victorian novelists like George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, Sarah Grand, Emily Bronte Thomas Hardy and Gissing, represented a challenge to the Victorian ideology, expressed and influenced the ages through their writings. They expressed sentiments of countless women who were subjugated and whose interests were curbed. They raised the morals and intellectual standards by which women centered novels could be judged and viewed. The mid- nineteenth century writers tried to redefine female identity and help women gain access to the public sphere. Late Victorian novelists like Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Sarah Grand, and Mary Braddon, created radically independent heroines who struggled for autonomy, identity and power their aim was to. (Kranidis 17).These novelists raised one's awareness and one's consciousness about gender. They endeavor to express the spirit of the age with all the resources of thoughts, feeling and thought. They reveal their response to their then society and its impact on them. Gaskell addresses, in her works, women conditions. Their novels present the changing face of feminine sensibility and the arrival of new sensibility that we call feminist sensibility. They dealt with various issues like, women question, gender politics. Resistance and conformity through which they were linked with each other. They pictured women's journey toward a new image of the feminine and their struggle.

As for Charles Dickens, he also depicts social illness regarding women and his concept of women of the 19th century through novels such as *Great Expectations*, *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times*.

Dickens's novels created a typical Victorian woman image that is ready to face the odds, dare to stand out from the crowd. Dickens, *Great Expectations*, *Hard Times*, *Oliver Twist*, *Bleak house*, *David Copperfield* are the best examples of the novels ,enriched with the spark of feminism. Dickens' Estella from *Great Expectations* represents the emerging vinle Victorian female, a far cry indeed from "The Girl of the Period."Estella is the post-1850 young woman who has her own ambition.

Dickens wrote during Victorian era when women were supposed to be at home and perform domestic tasks, he criticized the cruelty of the Victorian society and people views of fallen women. Dickens, *Oliver Twist* is an example of such criticism. Dickens female characters like Agnese, Rose and Nancy are from different social standings but are filled with moral strengths. Dickens *Oliver Twist* is a

perfect picture of feminism as his aim is to raise questions about the inhumanity against the characters. Dickens is deeply concerned with fallen women and saw them as victims of society. Nancy in spite of being fallen is a strong woman and described as “brass” in the novel. Nancy has an inner conflict of what is good and evil and as the novel develops, she becomes the reason why Oliver returns to a normal life.

Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Thomas Hardy and George Eliot, each in their own way have in at one major work questioned the absolute nature of two groups of women the pure and the fallen. Through their study of sexual fall (Tess, Becky Sharp, Nancy), these novelists were able to envision the acute and manifold enigma of Victorian women from all classes, and denude the spurious respectability which personified the patriarchy. In so doing like many feminists and social reformers, they worked to improve the conditions of women and express their support for the cause. The activists and writers in some ways admit what Juliet Mitchell affirms, “Feminism as a conscious, that is self-conscious, protest movement arose as a part of a revolutionary bourgeois tradition that had equality of mankind as its highest goal.”(Qtd. in Bacchi 109)

George Eliot wants to explore how social environment acts to produce different outcomes for young women who on the surface seem to have been born in almost the same circumstances. George Eliot makes her women recognize the flaws in conventionality this is an improvement. George Eliot had to work under a male pseudonym in search of her name and joined the stream to make a place in the gender biased society and recognition. George Eliot became famous after Adam Bede.

George Eliot, the contemporary feminist was in support of her views that change will not come from the top down because those at the top maintain male centered ideas of reality that are naturally distorted. Eliot experienced between compliance and rebellion. Was George Eliot a feminist? It depends on how we define the vexed term, she is in all terms an advocate for equal rights for women. Her novels frequently highlighted the stifling limitations placed on women’s lives in the Victorian period. One of the most memorable examples is her account of Maggie Tulliver’s turbulent childhood in *The Mill on the Floss*.

Eliot accepted the view that women differ from men by nature: she saw the sexes as complementary and celebrated women’s special qualities rather than “equality”. In her novel *Middlemarch*, George Eliot challenges assumptions about gender and genera by associating Durothea both masculine authority and feminine emotion.

The increasing emphasis on the feminine virtue activated the call for women’s movement. By 1860’s novelists endeavored to examine the institution of marriage and women’s identity. Isben’s Nora (*A Doll’s House*) created vibration by slamming the door.

Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* is a true reflection of feminism .The writer shapes a strong and independent that pursues true love and equality, she is a different woman who cast a sharp contrast to the man dominating society. Jane fights for her own rights and love, gradually Jane becomes a feminist. She struggles for equality on economy and marriage. Jane is not tempted by money and does not want to be a mistress. Through Jane’s struggle for self-realization, she proves the world that a woman facing the odds to become independent and successful on her own was not a far-fetched as it may have seemed.

Emily Bronte’s novel, “*Wuthering Heights*” is also an good example of feminism.

Virginia Woolf, before the Second World War, argued that women's experience, in the women's movement, could be the basis for transformative social change. She encouraged women to break free of the repression they were inflicted to in the patriarchal society. Through her works, she models her perspective towards feminism, influences Victorian literary society. Virginia was the member of 'Fabian Society' and the "Women's Co-operative Guild" which fought for the rights of women including their right to vote. *A Room of One's Own* emphasizes that women should have equal rights with men as to fiction writing.

Woolf's intention is to increase female consciousness and subvert the male dominance has many parallels with contemporary female insights. Virginia Woolf explores feminism throughout her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. Through her novel she has explored the roles of women and how they seemed in significant in that particular time period. The novels starts with feminist tone to show emerging voice in women. An example of a women character in *Mrs. Dalloway* that breaks through society's expectations of a truism woman from that period. It shows that women are capable of taking on the jobs that were seen as traditionally for men and it can also be seen that she is rejecting the traditional role of a woman showing the change in society.

Women could not demand equality in the Victorian era the notion that woman was helpless was strongly felt by the Victorians, yet in the assiduous work of the feminists to counter male regime served to inspire many writers of the era. Hence they offer new insights into complexities of women's growth and independence and gain brief authority. Hardy favored the question of enfranchisement and the issue of illiterate votes. His views were different from liberal feminists who insisted that true destiny of woman lay in fulfilling the role of the mother and wife; he nurtured strong anti-marriage views on marriage which was more socialistic

The late Victorian novelists signaled an entry into the 1890's debate on the 'women question'. The novels showed numerous examples of changed forms many of them hold job's not normally held by women. Women held variety of occupations (Governess, religious text illustrator, Dairy Maid, social worker etc.). This supervision of women in almost all kinds of employment was a form of social control that late Victorian novelists depicted. The era saw the rise of protest novels; new women novels laid the foundation for the resurgence of popular feminist fiction. Women's movement in Britain paid more attention to the right to vote, right to property, right to education. The early admit Victorian feminists initiated a campaign on women's empowerment.

Queen Victoria's disapprobation of the women's suffrage as a 'mad folly' was a clear indication for women to restrict themselves to the domestic domain. In spite of the criticism hurled against it, suffrage movement gained strength in European countries. Feminism, was a boon to women the path to freedom was not a trouble free task

Dickens, among the 19th Century writers who have strongly made serious advocacy in favor of education. In his *Hard Times*, he argues that the education he refers to is not a synonymous of a simple classroom teaching or instruction. He highlights the kind of his education type is the one whereby one learns all lifelong and in which women harvest positive impact through a reconsideration of their identity. Prostitution became one of the big "social evil". Dickens along with Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot developed the character of fallen women to comment on various aspects of Victorian society. Dickens involved himself in the formation of *Urania Cottage*, a reclamation house for prostitutes, which led to his attitude towards fallen women. Dickens novel

Oliver Twist emphasized on the life of prostitutions that were neglected and thrown away like waste. Dickens led a crusade through his literary work and become a part of “moral reform movement”. Dickens channeled the rescued effort of fallen women in his Home for Homeless Women known as Urania Cottage, which he founded with the philanthropist Angela Burden-Coutts. Dickens is different from other novelists at viewing the concept of saving prostitutes, which is well demonstrated in his novels David Copperfield, and Bleak house.

Dickens believed in the idea that fallen women should emigrate to other countries for a better reformation of life. Dickens involvement with rescue work is clearly shown in bleak House as the split between Lady Dedlock and Esther Summer son is a representation of the public and private women and societies ideas behind that character. Dickens is an great advocate of feminism.

Hardy’s novels confirm as he tries to create a platform for the emergence of women who claims self ownership. Hardy creates stories that give scope for personal evaluation and development and his novels replete with feminist ideas which reveal a different cast of mind and imagination because his outlook is tinged with revolutionary zeal. In Tess of the d’ Urbevilles, Thomas Hardy depicts a heroine punished by her community for losing her grace. Hardy’s Tess is a victim of social prejudice and male dominance in Victorian patriarchal society.

Hardy witnesses the injustice of social law and the ill effect of male-dominance over women and dramatize them in the novel through the miserable life of Tess who is crushed by the vicious power of society.

Elizabeth Gaskell, the famous novelist inspired by the air of feminism who wrote Ruth (1853) which is concerned with the representation of fallen women and the double standard of female sexuality. Gaskell insight into the redemption of the fallen women by giving them chance in domestic sphere. Gaskell, influenced by Josephine Butler a notable campaigners of the era, certified Butler’s ideology of the ‘home influence’. Gaskell like Charles Dickens humanizes the prostitutes as a human being. Her novel Ruth dealt with subjects that moved through boundaries which were earlier feared. Dickens and Gaskell, both were deeply concerned with rescue efforts for the fallen women. Gaskell with her different refuges in Manchester aimed to help “fallen Women”.

Conclusion

Feminism and feminist’s were a big challenge to the Victorian sentiments. It was the voice of the women asserting her desire that made the Victorian re-assesses the stance and position of women. Feminist with a combination of intellect, ambition, ability and flawless character created a sense of awakening by cautioning women about the dangers of male hegemony. History of Victorian feminism its impact on society and literature arouses interest to study the Victorian novels from the below, from the marginalized perspective. Woman’s articulation of their demands and their struggle to attain them made an impact on British social consciousness, woman’s identity, and self image. Social structures oppressing women became the theme of late Victorian novels. They tried to entangle the standards prescribed by the Victorian society which can be detected in the works of Hardy, Dickens, Eliot George, Gaskell, Austene, Isben Verginia Woolf. Their novels rose above male mimicry and modest approach, their aim was to undermine cultural ideologies alerting the society to accept female assertion as an alternative to conventional female roles. Female characters of these novelists are found standing up for their rights as everybody has the rights to pursue happiness, to

pursue the true spirit of life, which has been seen from their struggle for independence and equality. Their story tells us that in a man-dominated society, a woman should strive for the decency and dignity. In spite of hardships of life, the brave woman should be brave enough to battle against it. Self-respect is the primary element and the spirit of feminism which taught them to defend themselves. When they are helpless in bad conditions, they fought the odds to survive. The independence and equality as a human is the first task.

Works Cited

- Charlotte, Bront. (2002). *Jane Eyre*. Beijing : Foreign Language Press.
- Dickens, Charles. *Oliver Twist*. London: penguin popular classics, 1994
- Dickens, Charles *Bleak House*. London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977
- Dickens, Charles *David Copperfield*. London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990
- Dickens, Charles *Great Expectations* .A Norton Critical Edition. London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999.
- *English Literature-Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.*
- Gaskell, Elizabeth Ruth. London:Dent,1967
- Mitchell, Juliet. "Women the Longest Revolution."1984. As quoted in Carol Lee Bacchi. *The politics of affirmative Action: 'Women,' Equality and Category Politics.* London: Sage Publications, 1996.
- Morgan, David. *Suffragists and Liberals: The Politics of Woman Suffrage in England.* Totowa : Rowman and Littlefield,1975.
- Morgan, Rosemarie. *Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy.* New York: Routledge, 1984.
- Morgan, Sue. *Women Religion and Feminism in Britain 1750-1900*.U.S.A: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2007.
- *Victorians.Co.uk* (<http://www.victorian.co.uk>)Victorian Era History Guide.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One' Own*. London; Hogarth Press, 1929.